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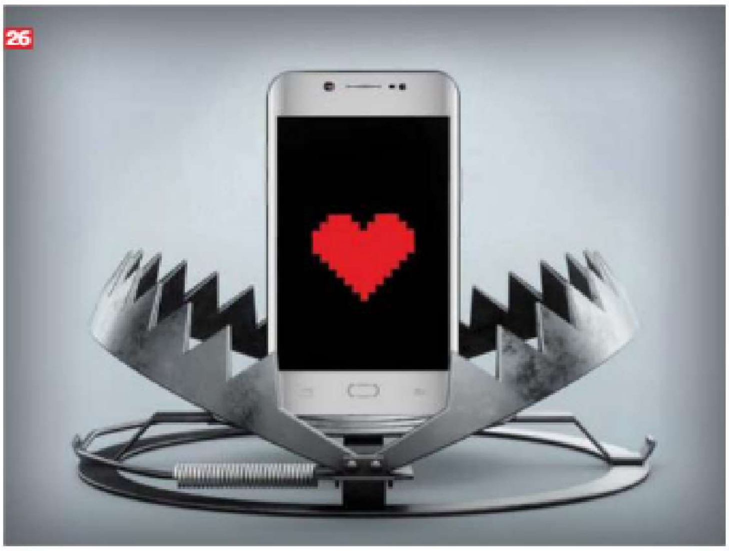

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

The West's attitude towards Qatar is questionable ('Anatomy of a Scandal', November 28, 2022). Western countries' apprehensions about Qatar's human rights record, its laws against homosexuality, and about Doha bagging the host-nation tag of the FIFA World Cup owing to corruption may be somewhat true. But Qatar cannot be labelled as the sole offender. FIFA's dubious role in making Qatar the host nation cannot be ruled out either. Even some prior deals to award the host nation tag by FIFA have been debatable on grounds of probity and transparency. The Western grudge against Qatar has mostly been driven by a sense of entitlement and superiority. Even with its shortcomings, Qatar took up the challenge to stage the greatest sporting extravaganza in the world. So, let the Qataris be given a free run to conduct the World Cup in their own way. Levelling any allegation or raising apprehensions at this initial stage is uncalled for. We should evaluate Qatar's performance at the end of the tournament. Apart from that, some countries in the Middle East and China are now heavily backing world football financially. So, ignoring Asia and Africa from representing world soccer will be suicidal for FIFA. The football governing body can rotate the hosting rights of the World Cup across continents.

Chanchal Nandy

DESTINATION QATAR

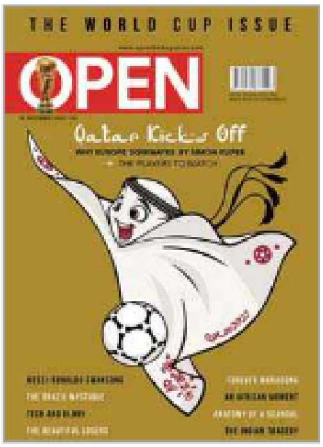
The opening ceremony of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was an extravaganza in all respects ('Playing Smart', November 28, 2022). The event managers made elaborate arrangements and performed to perfection during the ceremony. The country has spent $300 billion to prepare for the kick-off, making it the biggest sporting event ever to be held in the region. The tournament brings the world together. Amid problems among nations, people wait for the World Cup eagerly. The sporting gala has unleashed excitement across the world.

CK Ramani Mani

INDIA LEADS

Though G20 was divided on Ukraine, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's words that "today's era is not of war" resonated with everyone ('Modi at G20', November 28, 2022). Ultimately, members adopted the Bali declaration which firmly condemned the war in Ukraine. Even though G20 was never a forum to resolve security issues, India took the initiative by reiterating that the best way to peace would be to return to the path of dialogue and diplomacy. The consensus document is a positive development as India takes over the G20 presidency in December.

KR Srinivasan



BRITISH QUAGMIRE

Few countries have been hit as hard as the UK of late ('An English Elegy', by Suhel Seth, November 28, 2022). The country's economy is in trouble after the Covid-19 pandemic and because of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Flawed governance, high cost of living, mounting taxes and rising inflation are plaguing the nation. The fault lies primarily with the political leaders. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is left to do the required course-correction and take hard decisions. Hopefully, he will be efficient and effective, even if he cannot perform a miracle.

Yusuf Shariff

POWER PLAY

The play *Pah-Lak* is a testament to the resistance movement of the Tibetans ('Prayer and Protest', by Chintan Girish Modi, November 28, 2022). The story revolves round Deshar, who defies her father to become a Buddhist nun, her self-immolation as a form of protest, and how it impacts the Tibetan movement. The play's Tibetan cast lends authenticity to the work.

Aditi Ray

By S PRASANNARAJAN

CULTURE WAR IN QATAR

THE QATAR WORLD CUP, like all previous World Cups, should be the pinnacle of "sportswatching". It was for the fans who filled the Lusail Iconic Stadium, which at the end of the match between the Cup favourites Argentina and underrated Saudi Arabia was a site of broken as well as inflated hearts. In a historic humiliation, Lionel Messi, GOAT for some, could only watch Saudi fans erupt in disbelief. He would have loved to hear what his country once sang for Maradona, the real GOAT with human flaws to match: *He took the ball, serene in his action/Ran past everybody to the keeper/And with a firm shot he became the shooter* (courtesy Simon Kuper's brilliant profile of Messi, the ultimate *pibe*, the boy, in *The Football Men*). In the first appearance of what could be his swansong Cup, Messi, who had not held it for his country unlike Maradona, witnessed unimaginable devastation. Saudi Arabian knights dancing in the air was the sight to behold for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who watched the match with Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. It was validation at its most spectacular for the prince, and he was not alone in believing that the riches of Arabia could buy both acceptance and adulation. Moments like this make a Jamal Khashoggi a blurry bad memory. The initial matches had already made "sportswatching" worthy of the catharsis or catastrophe it provided, and the beauty of the game had already begun to overshadow the murky history of Qatar's Cup.

AFP

Still, "sportswashing" is the word that refuses to go away as the host balances being Qatar with being a global show stealer. On-field, the players chose to be dissenters first, especially the ones from Iran and Germany. The Iranians remained silent as their national anthem played in the Khalifa International Stadium in the match against England, and The Three Lions took a knee in turn. The Iranian players, in silence, joined in prayer with Mahsa Amini who died in custody for not hiding under a hijab, and played out their rebellion against the moral dictatorship of the ayatollahs. The English were just keeping up the post-George Floyd tradition of bringing social justice from the street to the stadium. A game played to a global audience is now more than a muscular expression of national glory; it is a display of a nation's unregulated sentiments as well. The Germans covered their mouths with their hands because they had an opinion on sexual rights that didn't sit well with the hosts or FIFA. Increasingly, the game is being played against an off-field team as well—the cultural and political arbiters.

True, football or baseball going woke is not something the fans enjoy. Then nothing is just what it is. The Qatar World Cup, in the parlance of fair-play advocates, is the most blatant display of "sportswashing" in the desert because the host country is playing a bigger game of power off-field. Qatar's critics may argue that the petro-rich autocracy is following what Hitler's Germany did in 1936 and Putin's Russia did in 2018. The Berlin Olympics "sportswashed" the Nazis' impending project in the Final Solution. Germany was not boycotted because the Games were nobler, politics was petty. Putin's neo-Soviet transgressions—Crimea was still fresh—were forgivable because Russia loved football and played it with gusto. Qatar has no World Cup history, but it owns a European club and the world's priciest players, and the story of how it 'acquired' the World Cup is not fully told yet, though no one has been proved guilty despite the media exposé on corruption in the highest echelons of FIFA. Qatar's ambition is bigger than its geographical size; and it has the resources to translate it. The World Cup may be the glitziest trophy it has acquired; take a trip to London to see its other proud possessions, ranging from Harrods to the Shard. Qatar has a statement to make.

It makes its boldest statements far beyond, in the prized parts of the free world. Once the world's most enterprising pearl diver and currently its most exhibitionist petro-plutocracy, Qatar is a showy emirate but a land of multiple taboos that cannot afford to deregulate its cultural habits, for culture, of the Wahhabi variety, is what defines its existential core. Wealth makes no effort to hide it; beer-denied English fans cannot change it. Qatar's answer to the criticism echoes the so-called marginal people's response to the resentment of the privileged: racial arrogance. Echoing the progressive fears about racial entitlement is the surest way to get even in the culture wars, no matter Qatar has shown that the free world is its favourite marketplace. Petrodollar adds to the aura of useful victimhood.

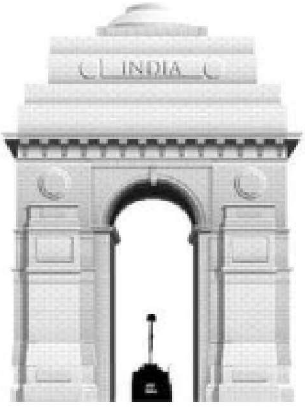
In the world's most watched sporting event, the bad backstory—or the morally sanitised venues—cannot restrict the beauty of the game once the stadiums are on fire. It doesn't matter who gets scarred in the culture war. Qatar has won despite losing the inaugural match. ■

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

DESPITE A NON-GANDHI taking over the presidency of Congress, the family's clout remains undiminished. The new president, Mallikarjun Kharge, is turning out to be a Manmohan Singh-like figure whom the party members generally ignore while looking up to the Gandhis for patronage. Take Rajasthan. Having openly cocked a snook at the party high command, Ashok Gehlot continues as chief minister without showing nary a hint of remorse for the public rebellion he had orchestrated to thwart Sachin Pilot's ambition to replace him. Even as Pilot gets frustrated with each passing day, the so-called high command has shown little inclination to discipline Gehlot for his defiance. Meanwhile, Pilot still banks on the Gandhi siblings—no, not Kharge—to do 'justice' to him. That, of course, is easier said than done. Lacking support of the MLAs, the only way he can realise his ambition is for the 10 Janpath high command to command the MLAs to switch loyalty from Gelhlot. The problem is that the high command itself stands so devalued, were it to insist on thrusting Pilot in place of Gehlot, it could trigger an open rebellion. For Gehlot can cast off the Congress tag and still hope to survive as chief minister. So, notwithstanding the Gandhi siblings' commitment to Pilot, it is highly unlikely Gehlot will oblige and step aside for his arch-rival to occupy the coveted chief ministerial *gaddi*.

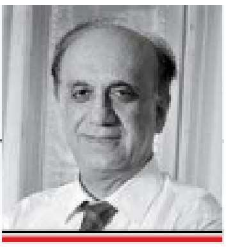
Meanwhile, in Haryana, too, the Gandhis are up against a rebellious Bhupinder Singh Hooda who ensured the defeat of their nominee, Ajay Maken, in the recent biennial elections to Rajya Sabha. Hooda is his own boss when it comes to managing the affairs of the Haryana Congress. He alone selected the Congress candidate for the byelection to the Assembly from Adampur, the stronghold of the Bhajan Lal family for decades. Yet, his handpicked candidate bit dust at the hands of a newbie politician from the Bhajan Lal lineage. This was reason enough for Hooda's rivals, especially, Kumari Selja and Randeep Singh Surjewala, to question the free hand the high command had given to the former chief minister. But the high command is helpless. Should it proceed against the likes of Gehlot and Hooda, they can always go their own separate ways, leaving Rahul Gandhi stranded mid-course on his so-called Bharat Jodo Yatra.



UNNOTICED BY THE media, the Sangh Parivar has been memorialising one of its earlier stalwarts. The birth centenary of KR Malkani, the founding editor of the RSS mouthpiece, *The Organiser*, and much later, the English daily, *The Motherland*, was marked by seminars and conferences in the last couple of weeks. In the Sangh Parivar hierarchy, Malkani was of the same vintage as Vajpayee and Advani, addressing both by their first names. Though regularly participating in the annual sessions of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh as a special invitee, and writing the party's political resolutions, he maintained a low profile. Even when the Jana Sangh tasted power, the Sangh publications relied on the small donations collected by RSS. One of the first significant decisions Malkani as editor of the then newly established weekly took was to challenge the ban on it in the apex court in 1950. The Nehru government was mighty angry by the exposure of horrendous atrocities committed against the Hindus in what was then East Pakistan. The court threw out the ban as an attack on the freedom of press. The first constitutional amendment which empowered the government to curb fundamental rights, including the right to free speech and to private property, was in part meant to undo the court verdict in the *Organiser* case. Unapologetic about his allegiance to the Sangh Parivar, Malkani was among the very first to be arrested on the night of June 25-26, 1975, hours before the actual proclamation of Emergency. And he was among the last to be released. A model of rectitude, he coveted neither money nor high political office. He died in the same West Delhi house he was allotted as a refugee from Pakistan. The present generation of journos flaunting proximity to RSS-BJP will do well to emulate Malkani's integrity and unselfish service to the saffron Parivar.

THE CBI IN GOA has an unusual problem: it is idle for want of a single corruption case to investigate. For more than a year, no one has filed a complaint of corruption. Even the Enforcement Directorate, hyperactive elsewhere, has little to do here. Truly, Goa seems to have attained a state of nirvana. ■

OPINION | **Minhaz Merchant**



Race and Rishi

The compulsion of multiculturalism

PART ONE OF THIS two-part column on why India has never had a Muslim prime minister ended with the question: "Does India need to learn from British politics?"

If Britain, with people of Indian origin forming just 2.3 per cent of the country's population, could select a prime minister from such a tiny minority, why has India never produced a Muslim prime minister even though Muslims form nearly 15 per cent of India's population?

Is the analogy accurate? Rishi Sunak was not elected prime minister by the British people. He was not even chosen as leader of the Conservative Party by the party's roughly 1,70,000 members. They chose Liz Truss.

Britain's increasingly multiracial society is rightly praised. It is reflected in the diverse composition of the House of Commons and in London's cultural life. That is where analysts miss the wood for the trees. Around 85 per cent of Britain's population is white. The balance 15 per cent comprises people of largely South Asian, East African and West Indian origin—the three geographies that were Britain's principal colonies.

> **Nearly two-thirds of the Conservative Party voted for Liz Truss over Sunak. A Sunak-led Conservative Party faces almost certain defeat in the next general election. In a general election, he will be as unelectable in Britain as an Indian Muslim is in India**

Crucially, this 15 per cent coloured population, comprising roughly 10 million people, is not spread out evenly across Britain. Nearly 4.5 million live in London out of the British capital's population of 9 million. Another 2.5 million people of Asian or African origin live in six other British cities: Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Leeds.

Thus of Britain's 10 million people of Asian and African origin, around 7 million live in just seven cities. The total population of these seven cities, including London, is around 15 million out of Britain's total population of 67 million.

Of these 15 million urban Britons, nearly 50 per cent (7 million) are of Asian and African origin. In contrast, the remaining 3 million coloured Britons are spread out thinly among 52 million British people who live outside the country's seven largest cities. These non-white Britons thus comprise only around 5 per cent of the population in the rest of small-town Britain.

In the county shires, it is difficult to come across a brown or Black face. For example, 98 per cent of the population in the Yorkshire town of Redcar is white. Around 97 per cent of Northumberland and County Durham is white.

This is why nearly two-thirds of the Conservative Party voted for Liz Truss over Rishi Sunak. That, too, is why a Sunak-led Conservative Party faces almost certain defeat in the next British general election due in just over two years.

This is where the comparison between Indian Muslims and Britons of Asian and African origin fails. On the face of it, both sets of "minorities" comprise around 15 per cent of the population in, respectively, India and Britain. In India, however, Muslims are evenly spread out across the country.

Historically, the comparison between the voting patterns of minority populations in India and Britain is even more inappropriate. Indian Muslims are descendents of Islamic conquerors. In Britain, people of Asian and African origin are former colonial subjects. Those who migrated to Britain in the 1950s from the West Indies are descendents of African slaves the British shipped to their Caribbean colonies.

Indian-origin migrants to Britain came from two streams: independent India impoverished by 190 years of British colonial rule; and East Africa, where Indians had gone to earn a better living than they could in colonial India but were expelled in the early 1970s.

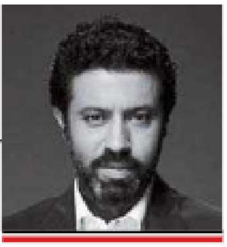
Britain has evolved from an overtly racist nation to a reluctant multiracial country over the last 30 years. Why do I say reluctant? Because racism has gone underground and is now covert, most visibly in the shires where older whites live. The young, in the cities, have embraced multiculturalism more quickly. In the leafy county shires, where British whites are over 95 per cent of the population, racism remains, though mostly in the closet.

Rishi Sunak is the first non-white British prime minister among 57 past British prime ministers. Despite the compulsion—and compulsion it is—of multiculturism, a general election in Britain would not have resulted in him being prime minister. It took the toxic prime ministerships of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss and the economic crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine war to convince Conservative Party MPs that Sunak was the most sensible choice to serve as interim prime minister.

In a general election, however, Sunak will be as unelectable in Britain as an Indian Muslim is in India. ■

(This is the last of a two-part column)

COMMENT | **Rahul Shivshankar**



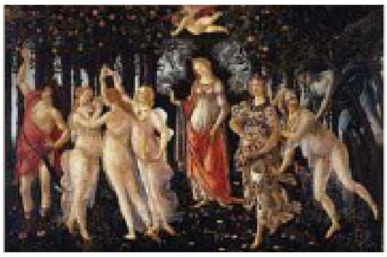
Why Blame Botticelli?

The eco-ninjas have crossed the line

"WHEN THERE'S NO food, what use is art? When there's no water, what use is art?" shouted a pair of anti-fossil fuel eco-ninjas who had glued themselves to the frame of *The Hay Wain* a few weeks ago at the London National Gallery. The painting is an invaluable masterpiece romanticising the pastoral idyllic by the great landscape artist John Constable.

The duo are among a growing number of environmental activists who have taken to gluing themselves to masterpieces displayed in some of the world's most visited museums.

Lately, the delicate countenances of a priceless Picasso in Melbourne; a Botticelli in Florence; a Rubens in Munich; a Vermeer in the Hague; and a Van Gogh in London have been imperilled by this tribe of agitators. The stated objective is to vandalise these iconic canvasses to conjure images of "unethical" dealmaking between oil companies and national governments. So why art, many ask. Why haven't the activists glued themselves to the front of polluting public transport vehicles? Surely, that would be a more apt analogy to draw? Those who speak up in defence of the desecrators take pains to distinguish the perpetrators of these artful terrors from your garden variety headline hunters. They point out that through their chosen method of creative destruction, John Constable's "painting becomes more than some escapist countryside fantasy—it becomes a poignant reminder that the natural landscape is endangered." This is perhaps also precisely why protestors menaced Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera*. Climate change brought on by carbon emissions will turn Earth into a sterile wasteland in total contrast to the fecund sylvan paradise that springs forth from Botticelli's canvas.



Botticelli's *Primavera*

The vandalism of the "Just Stop Oil" activists has thus served to force us to ponder their questions: "When there's no food, what use is art? When there's no water, what use is art?"

But for all those who militate righteously against exploitative capitalism, here's a point to ponder. The reason that the climate activists got within touching distance of humanity's most treasured heritage in the first place is because of the unstated trust between the state's institutions and the public. It is easy to forget that the openness and accessibility of democracy that we take for granted are just as fragile as the elements of the biosphere that we seek to preserve. If the means of protest undermine the terms of the social contract, we should expect an erosion of trust. The actions of the few will have consequences for the vast majority that may find their freedoms curbed by security checks, erecting of barricades and cordon sanitaire. Civil disobedience is a legitimate tool of dissent employed by activists. Mahatma Gandhi's blockades worked and won approval over the public even though their businesses were heavily impacted only because Indians under the British knew that they had no other means to protest the draconian and arbitrary impositions of their colonial masters.

But times have changed. The mode and manner of dissent against colonial rule cannot be equated with dissent in a self-ruled democracy. In most democracies around the world, the state and the public accept that protests will be designed to cause a degree of inconvenience. But at the same time, there is also depleting appetite for protests that inflict too great a cost on the public.

Indeed, Extinction Rebellion eco-warriors, Million Maskers, MAGA stormtroopers, Bajrang Dals, Kranti Senas, Ram Senas and even the "*dadis*" of Shaheen Bagh have recourse to avenues other than occupying public spaces, storming Congress, vandalising public property or defacing a nation's heritage.

In the world's oldest democracy, the January 6, 2021 siege and subsequent storming of the US Capitol threaten to increase the gap between the US government and the vast majority of Americans. Now, there's much debate on the merits of a Bill being mooted to erect a permanent fence around the Capitol building. Here, in the world's largest democracy, the Supreme Court has repeatedly expressed derision over the blockades mounted by a cast of protesters across the country and, especially, in the context of the agitation over the CAA legislation. The Supreme Court ruled that the "right to protest cannot be anytime and everywhere. There may be some spontaneous protests but in a case of prolonged dissent, there cannot be continued occupation of public spaces affecting the right of others." The unfortunate consequence of the Supreme Court judgment is that it is now being indiscriminately quoted by authorities to deny permission to civil rights groups to demonstrate against the state. In fact, there is today a permanent injunction on protesting atop Raisina Hill, the once cherished soap-box of India's democracy. A small number of citizens have ruined it for the greater number.

Perhaps more than climate change, Just Stop Oil activists may have inadvertently given us all cause to ponder the more immediate question: Is the abuse of liberty only harming democracy by endangering liberty? ■

Rahul Shivshankar is editor-in-chief of Times Now

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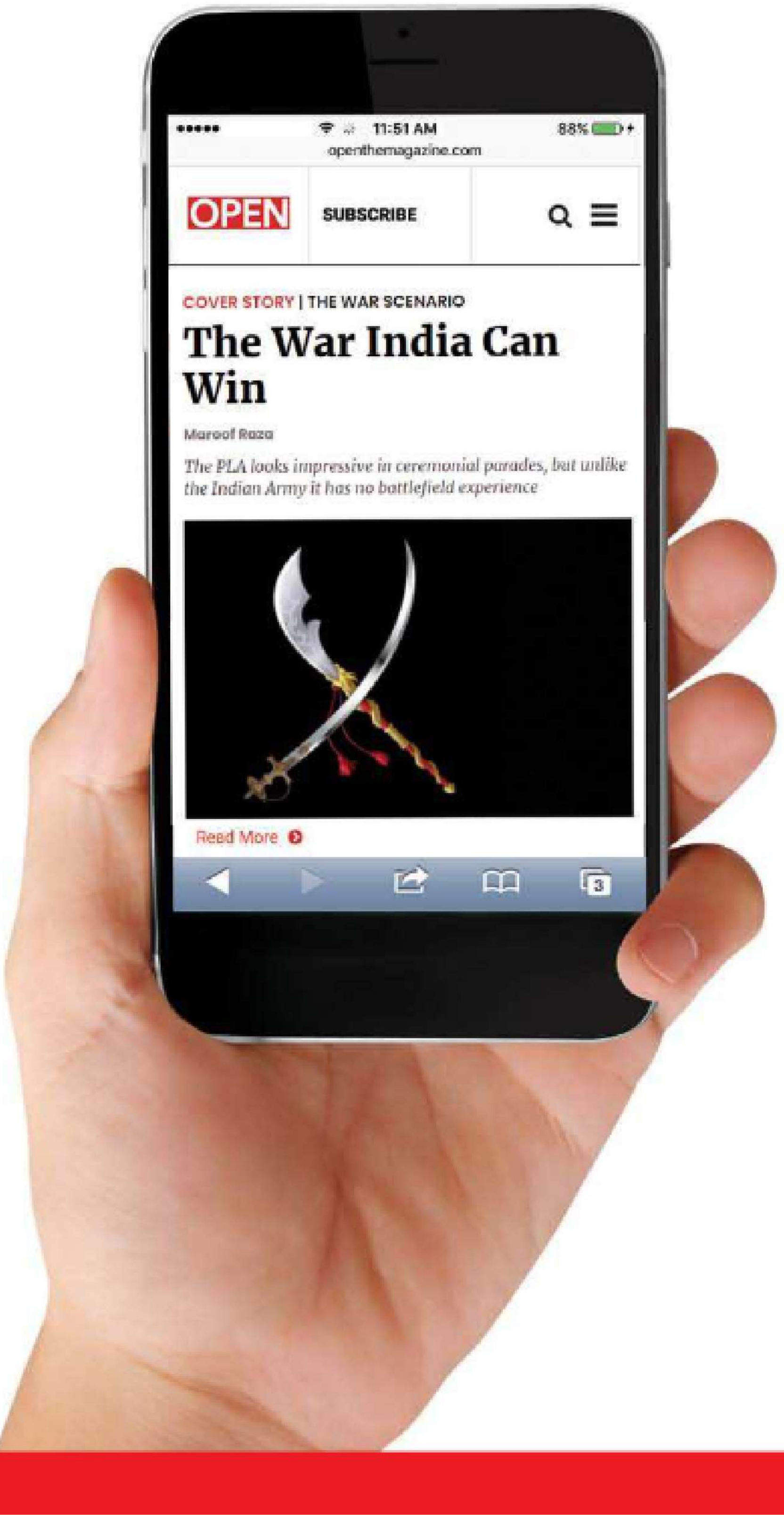

COVER STORY | THE WAR SCENARIO

The War India Can Win

Maroof Raza

The PLA looks impressive in ceremonial parades, but unlike the Indian Army it has no battlefield experience

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NOTEBOOK

A Trade Wind from Australia

ON NOVEMBER 22, the Australian parliament ratified the Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (AI-ECTA), another trade agreement that was negotiated swiftly and signed into a deal. India negotiated a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the UAE in a record 88 days earlier this year. With this, India has concluded a third trade agreement since 2021. In an era of trade pessimism, the “mini FTA” with Australia stands out as an example of what can be done when countries have the required will to push trade.

Under the deal, India will eliminate tariffs on 85 per cent of Australian goods exported to India. This figure will go up to 91 per cent over 10 years. At the same time, 96 per cent of Indian goods exported to Australia will get duty-free access to that country’s markets from the start. In 2020, India was Australia’s seventh-largest trading partner with two-way trade at $24.3 billion. This figure is expected to rise to $50 billion in the next five years.

The agreement with Australia is the first free trade agreement (FTA) that India has signed with a developed nation in more than a decade. It is expected to serve as a foundation for a more comprehensive FTA—the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA)—that will be negotiated soon. Under the AI-ECTA, India’s dairy sector has been kept out of the purview of imports from Australia as have wheat, rice, chickpeas, bajra, apples and sugar. There are a handful of other items as well. These are all politically sensitive trade items that impact a large number of farmers in India. India has also managed to liberalise visa arrangements for Indian students. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal noted that the “agreement would also open new opportunities for the service sector in India and would immensely benefit students by offering them an opportunity to work in Australia.”

Australia, in turn, will gain access to the Indian market for its wines and other agricultural products. Tariffs up to 30 per cent on avocados, onions, broad, kidney and adzuki beans, cherries, shelled pistachios, macadamias, cashews in-shell, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, currants will be eliminated over seven years.

> **Under the FTA, India will eliminate tariffs on 85 per cent of Australian goods exported to India. This figure will go up to 91 per cent over 10 years. At the same time, 96 per cent of Indian goods exported to Australia will get duty-free access to its markets from the start. In 2020, India was Australia’s seventh-largest trading partner with two-way trade at $24.3 billion. That is expected to rise to $50 billion in the next five years**

The deal comes at a time when the world is in the grip of trade pessimism. The trend is not new. In dollar terms, trade has continued to increase and after the pandemic years, has returned to a new high. UNCTAD in its Global Trade Update in February this year said the value of global trade reached a record level of $28.5 trillion in 2021, an increase of 25 per cent on 2020 and 13 per cent higher compared to 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic struck. As a percentage of global GDP, however, trade peaked in 2008 when it stood at 61 per cent. It has not crossed that mark. In 2020—the year Covid struck—that figure was 52 per cent, roughly the same level where it was in 2003.

The year 2008 stands out in the story of global trade. That was the last year when a round of trade liberalisation talks was held, in Geneva. That was also the year when the global financial crisis hit Western countries, and developing countries thereafter. The economic crisis in the West ensured that free trade became a political liability for those countries.

But the real issue that stalled progress in trade talks was the “comprehensive” approach of Western nations, which demanded that all contentious issues be settled in a grand bargain. Developing countries led by India, Brazil, China and South Africa were in no position to barter away key livelihood issues. This was the approach that politically doomed trade openness in the US. The inability of that country to compensate the losers from ambitious trade deals like NAFTA ultimately made it very hard to sell free trade to large sections of the American electorate.

The pound of flesh demanded from India was lower tariffs on agricultural imports as well as its ability to levy special tariffs in case of an extraordinary surge in imports. For a country like India to give up the Special Safeguard Mechanism—an instrument that allows imposition of

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

special tariffs on agricultural imports—would sound the death knell for millions of small and marginal farmers. This was one of the key reasons for the breakdown of the Geneva talks. The then trade minister of India famously said that "I am not risking the livelihood of millions of farmers."

It took India a while to give up the "comprehensive" attitude. What befell the FTA with Australia is an example. Negotiations for the FTA were started in 2011. But after nine rounds, negotiations were suspended in 2015 as the process was going nowhere. India was adamant to protect its dairy sector as well as liberalised access for professionals.

Six years later, in September 2021, the threads were picked up again for an FTA (a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement or CECA). But instead of chasing a politically difficult, "all in" deal, the two countries decided to leave out sensitive, deal-breaking, issues. Goyal hinted at a "mini FTA" in February this year after meeting his Australian counterpart Dan Tehan. And that is exactly what was delivered in April when the AI-ECTA was signed.

Economists worldwide tend to view regional and bilateral FTAs negatively. In theory, a comprehensive—worldwide—free trade regime is preferable to a "salad bowl" of individual FTAs between different regions and countries. A comprehensive agreement irons out frictions and the economic gains from trade are far greater than individual deals. But very often economists ignore the practical issue of reaching/concluding such deals that are filled with political pitfalls. For one, the power asymmetry between the bloc of rich countries and developing countries is too large for a comprehensive agreement to be reached without rancour. The initial trade liberalisation rounds after 1991 were achieved in an ideologically charged atmosphere where state-led development was discredited ideologically. For another, there are simply too many countries in the world to allow for a reasonable deal to emerge.

In recent years, another, far more difficult, problem has emerged. Trade is now a geopolitical issue as well. Countries like China, that have massive trade surpluses, have used their economic heft for political purposes. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was initially held as an "alternative" to the Western "imposed" free trade system, turned out to be another neo-colonial instrument of domination. From Africa to Pakistan and from Sri Lanka to Solomon Islands, trade and investment are now far more contentious than they were even at the height of "forced openness" back in the 1990s. The danger now is outright political domination from a country with imperialist ambitions.

This has led to an adverse effect on trade as well. India and other countries are unlikely to sign trade deals solely on the basis of economic gains. The fear that there may be hidden political costs that follow such deals has made countries cautious. FTAs are more likely between friendly countries than those who offer opaque deals. Even multilateral trade deals (such as the RCEP) are now treated with caution. India opted out of RCEP despite domestic criticism from those in favour of the deal for these very reasons.

But this need not be a cause for pessimism and India's FTAs with UAE and Australia show there is a third option between a comprehensive, global, free trade arrangement and increasing autarky. India has not let trade pessimism and its unhappy experience with trade liberalisation talks come in the way of bilateral trade deals. What matters are political will and the exploration of opportunities that have to be seized as soon as they emerge. ■

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

PORTRAIT • ZAKIR NAIK

PROBLEM PREACHER

His presence in Qatar led to a diplomatic imbroglio

THAT HIS MERE presence is enough to create a diplomatic imbroglio between India and Qatar says something about the aura of apprehension that surrounds Zakir Naik, an Islamic preacher now settled in Malaysia after fleeing India. His presence in Qatar during the football World Cup was to give religious sermons and it was initially said to be at the behest of the government there. India protested and even threatened to call off the visit of the vice president to the inauguration of the games. Qatar, belatedly, clarified that Naik did not have any official invitation and the tension is now somewhat diffused, but what happened was in keeping with the many controversies that have dogged him.

Naik distances himself from violence and extremism, as also the name of his television channel—Peace TV—seeks to suggest. But what appears to be straightforward words—terrorism, violence, equality of women—for most people become amenable to many definitions when he begins to talk before the massive audience he commands. What follows is orthodoxy couched as progress, conspiracy theories and a couched rationale for terrorists and terrorism. It is a trick many countries, not just India, has caught on to.

Naik is a doctor and his career in Islamic evangelism began in the late 1980s. It started with educational and charitable works in the Muslim community and was followed by the astute use of media for his reach to increase exponentially. By the turn of the new millennium, he had become a phenomenon. Consider this *Open* profile from 2009 when he was at his respectable peak and hosting a convention: "Over 10 days, more than a million people came from all over the country. On 35 acres of prime suburban land in Mumbai, several air-conditioned tents went up...Last month when the conference was in progress, there were giant billboards all across the city's suburban highways, there were advertisements on buses, Muslim drivers had pamphlets on the dashboards of their Meru cabs." But even then, there were aspects about him that had many worried. One was his defence of Osama bin Laden and turning 9/11 into a conspiracy by the US itself.

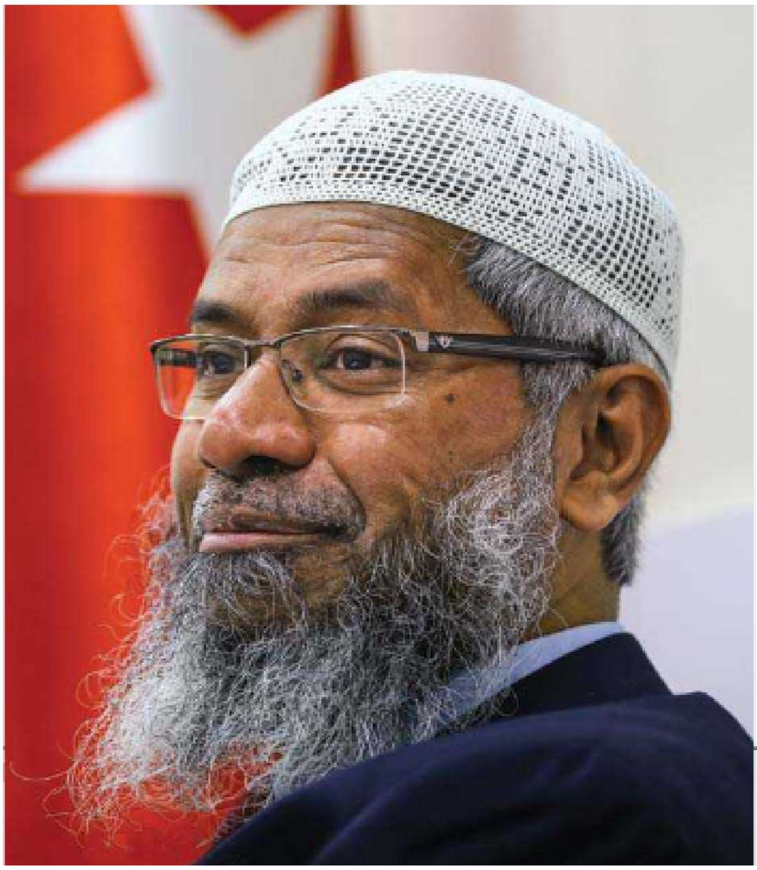
There were other distortions. Did he condemn suicide bombers? Of course, unless it was war. Is terrorism wrong? Obviously, but terrorism against anti-social elements is fine and, also, isn't the US the biggest terrorist? Should apostates be killed? No, unless they commit a crime that anyway deserves a death penalty. There is never a clear "yes" and "no" answer with Naik. Ideas appropriate to medieval societies, like beating wives to discipline them or secondary status of non-Muslims in Islamic nations, are defended with an appeal to scripture and reason, preceded often by the term 'scientific'.

This is what often lands him into trouble. It has led to him being banned from the UK and Canada because of hate speech accusations. He found himself in trouble in Malaysia, the country that gave him sanctuary, after he riled up its Chinese citizens by terming them as much an outsider as he was. Its former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said in one interview that they wanted him out, but not many countries were willing to accept Naik.

What no one could doubt was his popularity, especially with the youth. It was a tele-evangelism empire in the making until India tightened the screws after the BJP government came to power. In 2016, his organisation was banned. That was the same year 29 people were killed when terrorists opened fire in a restaurant in Bangladesh. One of them was found to be a follower of Naik. There was no direct link to him but Bangladesh banned Peace TV. It is still said to reach 20 crore viewers. Naik is also accused of money-laundering, but attempts by India to extradite him have not been successful. Likewise, the Interpol has rejected requests to issue a Red Corner Notice that would make an arrest internationally possible. A man without a country, pariah to many, Naik remains much regarded in Islamic nations, a reason why he found welcome in Qatar, even if the government now tries to distance itself. ■

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

Photos GETTY IMAGES



ANGLE

THE PRICE OF HUBRIS

Why China will lose its war with Covid

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

WHAT IS HAPPENING in China's losing war with Covid is a fine illustration of the hubris of man, which is most amplified in totalitarian societies ruled by dictators where with every layer of absolutism, the idea of certainty and failure dwindles increasingly less until, despite the evidence staring in the face, they march on as if nothing has happened. Cases are at their peak since the pandemic began and the news agency AFP reported this week: "China recorded a total of 31,444 domestic cases Wednesday, of which 27,517 were asymptomatic, the National Health Bureau said." Consider also this report by Bloomberg on Thursday: "Zhengzhou, home to Apple Inc.'s largest iPhone manufacturing site, will be largely locked down for five days as officials in the Chinese city resort to tighter curbs to quell a swelling Covid-19 outbreak. Mobility controls—a euphemism for lockdown—will be imposed in the main urban areas of Zhengzhou from Friday through November 29 because of rising virus cases, Zhengzhou's pandemic task force said in a statement late Wednesday."

The rest of the world is over the pandemic precisely because it had already lost. It wasn't vaccines or lockdowns, but the total victory of the virus in infecting everyone that led to this. China, in the beginning, was a magnificent symbol of success because its lockdowns are near-perfect. As a result, the Chinese population, much of the 1.4 billion of them, are Covid virgins and, with each iteration, the virus has learnt how to spread faster, so all of China is now like tinder before a mutated forest fire. It, therefore, scrambles in a panic now and, even so, relies more on the same tactics that brought them to this pass. Its lockdowns will be successful but all that it will do is prolong the suffering.

Where it stands now could still become a victory if they had humility. The case could be made that because of its extreme stand, it managed to stave off Alpha and Delta and those were the two killer waves. They saved lives when no one else could. Omicron is mild and about as dangerous as your average viral fever. All that has to be done is to admit that there is no permanent escape and live with Omicron. Xi Jinping can claim that this was the grand plan all along; to wait until it became harmless. But this is where hubris comes into play. China will not do that because it believes that it has to win against Covid, and admission of failure is a sign of weakness. The economy can go to the dogs or the population live in perpetual fear, so long as the state does not admit defeat, the authority of the party and its leader will remain untarnished, and in the end that is the only thing that matters. But nature is crafty. It will not make an exception and the more China locks itself down, the more loopholes the virus will find. It is in no hurry. It will keep returning until the Great Wall collapses. ■

IDEAS

ACTIVISM

The separation of sport and politics has always been a contentious topic. Events like the Olympics even have rules that ensure such a divide remains. But in an era of athlete activism, even organisations like the International Olympic Committee are allowing more leeway, permitting players to express their views before the start of the competition, for instance, but not on the podium. When FIFA was asked by some European teams if they could have their captains wear armbands promoting gay rights, it threw the rule book at them. The German team retaliated in their opening match by posing for the team photo with their hands covering their mouths, a gesture that has now gone viral. FIFA's motives were probably intended to not offend the host country Qatar where homosexuality is forbidden. But by being so rigid, they have ensured the opposite. The German team's gesture has garnered more attention than any pictures of players wearing armbands would have. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'I think it's really weird that athletes get told to just stick to sports'

NAOMI OSAKA
JAPANESE TENNIS PLAYER

SOFT POWER | **Makarand R Paranjape**

Persian Discontent

Salman Rushdie's prophecy and the second Iranian revolution

THE SATANIC VERSES was published by Penguin Viking on September 26, 1988. India was the first country to ban it. Khushwant Singh, otherwise a proponent of freedom of expression, advised Penguin India not to risk publishing a text bound to excite communal passions. Indeed, the novel, when those capable of reading it began, at times with the help of English-known interlocuters, to understand its implications, ignited the wrath of the faithful.

Thirteen years later, on September 11, 2001, Islamist terrorists hijacked four passenger planes, smashing two of them into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Centre, New York. The third plane was crashed into the Pentagon, while the fourth fell into a field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people died, over 25,000 were injured and billions of dollars of damage resulted from these strikes by religious extremists.

VS Naipaul, Nobel laureate, and the other literary genius spawned by the subcontinental diaspora, who had tasked himself with tracking the rise of radical Islam, had failed to predict the catastrophe of 9/11. He was looking among the converts, perhaps rightly so, having covered Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia "among the believers." But that the real danger lurked at the heart of the homeland of Islam, Saudi Arabia, was something he had not been able to foresee.

A decade before 9/11, Rushdie, his life already dangerously deranged by the fatwa (see *https://openthemagazine.com/columns/holy-horrors/*), tried to defend his *Satanic Verses* by contending that its central theme is not to be found in the so-called blasphemous passages against the Islamic religion or its prophet as his outraged critics allege. The novel is actually about migration, cultural mixing, and globalisation: "*The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves," (*Imaginary Homelands*).

It is amazing how major academic careers have been merely footnotes to great literature. The noted post-colonial critic and Harvard don, Homi Bhabha, for instance, takes up the same question, "How does newness enter the world?" also answering it in a very Rushdiesque manner. Bhabha extends Rushdie's notion of erratic emergence in his celebrated essay which also lent his volume, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1984), its title. However, neither Rushdie's essay, 'In Good Faith', let alone *The Satanic Verses*, are mentioned. Perhaps, Bhabha wanted to avoid the associations, finding them politically damaging. Others might say that it a serious omission in acknowledging sources.

Cut to the 43-year-old Islamic Republic of Iran, which issued the death sentence on Rushdie, whose after-effects resulted in a murderous assault on him earlier this year. A massive repression is underway in Iran against the nationwide protests and demonstrations that have followed the September custodial death of Mahsa Amini. Amini was allegedly tortured and brutalised because her hijab or headscarf showed a couple of inches of hair. That she was Kurdish was considered the additional reason for her excessive punishment, incarceration, and subsequent death.

Nor is this the first wave of protests against the fundamentalist Shiite regime. Since 2015, a series of pushbacks against the Islamist theocracy has erupted across the country. Civil disobedience and demonstrations have been supported, with increasing effectiveness, by online and social media activism. Whether over low wages, unemployment, corruption, water scarcity, or inflation, that there is widespread disaffection in Iran, especially among the youth, cannot be denied. Despite harsh crackdowns, the recent demonstrations have been gathering strength after the nationwide, even worldwide, outrage.

The situation has now taken, what many observers call, a critical turn. The state is using heavy weaponry, including helicopters, against its own citizens. Since September, over 300 people have been killed, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), including 40 children. The Shiite fundamentalist regime has retaliated by mounting an iron-fisted suppression of the popular revolt.

The crushing of protests in the Kurdish areas is so severe that videos emerging from Bukan and Mahabad are reminiscent of an ongoing war, with troops travelling in trucks with mounted machine guns. In Javanrud, armed forces are seen firing assault rifles in deserted city streets filled with wreckage and rubbish. From the capital Tehran itself, footage on social media shows women burning their veils, cutting their hair, and even random passersby knocking off the turbans of clerics. Without question, this is the boldest challenge that the Islamist regime has faced since its inception.

A charismatic leader, the updated counterpart of Ayatollah Khomeini who led the Islamic revolution against the Shah of Iran in 1979, is, however, yet to emerge. Such a leader, along

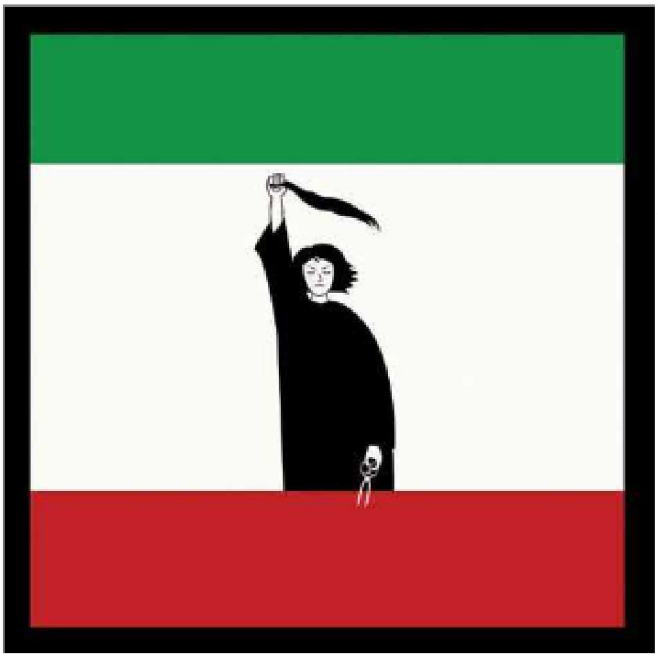


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

BEING CUT OFF FOR SO LONG, A ONCE-PROSPEROUS NATION NOW HAS SUBSTANDARD QUALITY OF LIFE FOR THE VAST MAJORITY. PERSIAN NATIONALISM AND NATIVISM, A SENSE OF CULTURAL COHESION AND SUPERIORITY, AND REJECTION OF ALL THINGS WESTERN AS BEING INHERENTLY EVIL ARE NO LONGER CONVINCING. WILL A SECOND REVOLUTION AND REGIME SUDDENLY OVERTAKE IRAN?

with a set of strong supporters, is essential as a rallying point. In addition, the armed forces and the police must turn away from the regime, which seems far from happening at present. But there is a growing if underground groundswell of a determined and organised faction which wishes to overthrow the current regime. It is this screened, if not secret, frontline, that is channelling whatever discontent is present in society against the regime.

Regardless of the actual prospects of a revolution, young people in Iran generally dislike the theocracy, the moral, in addition to the criminal police, the widespread hypocrisy and corruption in the ruling elites, and the anti-Western, often irrationalist tinge of the dominant version of Islamism. They also long for a normalisation of relations with the rest of the world and the enjoyment of international goods, services, and items of consumption.

Being cut off for so long, a once-prosperous nation now has substandard quality of life for the vast majority. Persian nationalism and nativism, a sense of cultural cohesion and superiority, and rejection of all things Western as being inherently evil are no longer convincing. Iranian exceptionalism and isolation no longer seem as attractive as they once were.

I visited Iran 20 years back as a member of India's cultural delegation in the "Dialogue of Civilizations" initiated by President Mohammad Khatami during his first term. His culture minister, Sayyid Ata'ollah Mohajerani, whom we met, was considered a liberal and a reformist. Indeed, during our visit, the Tehran Philharmonic and the Tehran Ballet were opened once again. Although the latter featured fully-clad female dancers in body tights and leotards performing behind a thin muslin screen, while the male dancers were in the forefront.

The intellectuals I interacted with me said very proudly, "We are not barbarians—nor are we Arabs," and then with a wry smile, "We didn't slaughter the American hostages." But the buildings and cars were run down, the hotels were of the state socialist pattern, with restricted food and beverages, the shops had subpar products, and the only fizzy drink you could buy was "Zam Zam Cola". There was scruffiness and dissatisfaction in the air. A friend joked when we waited to wade through the chaotic traffic at a pedestrian crossing, "Be careful; if you are run over, your wife will get only one-fourth the compensation of a Muslim."

To return to Rushdie, we might ask, "how does newness enter the world" with the specific identification of this question with a regime change in Iran. Changes steal upon us, says Rushdie, taking us by surprise: "Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world" (*Imaginary Homelands*).

Fully grasping Rushdie's migrant ontology, Bhabha echoes his exaltation of hybridity. More apropos futures thinking, Bhabha avers that newness "has to be discovered *in medias res*" because the future is "not part of the 'progressivist' division between past and present, or the archaic and the modern; nor is it a 'newness' that can be contained in the mimesis of 'original and copy'" (*The Location of Culture*).

Bhabha seems to reject altogether the idea that newness is either evolutionary, a property that comes out of the past, nor a mutation of what was already inherent in something. He also rejects the idea of newness as a form of cloning or copying. Newness, to him, is ultimately to be discovered, all of a sudden, not in breaks between the past and the present, nor in divisions between historical or chronological periods *in medias res*.

"*In medias res*" implies discovering something in the middle of its formation, when it is neither what it was in the past, nor something entirely new. In Bhabha's notion of newness, there is a fluidity, an indeterminacy even. In its sudden, in-between presence, newness resembles the "emergentism" of evolutionary biologists. Emergentists hold that complex entities display properties that are absent in their lower-order, individual constituents.

Will a second revolution and regime suddenly overtake Iran in the complex, chaotic, and unpredictable fashion that Rushdie prophesied and Bhabha elaborated? Could Bhabha, with his Iranian-Zoroastrian ancestry, and Rushdie, the renegade apostate, ex-Muslim, together have given us a hint of things to come? ■

PLAYTIME WITH BORIA MAJUMDAR

Seeking Pelé in Kolkata

The city's enduring love affair with Brazil

A DRIVE FROM NORTH to South Kolkata and almost every bylane has a Brazil flag. It is almost like the election season when flags and graffiti of rival parties adorn the streets of the city. Kolkata, during the next month, is a subcontinental Brazilian colony. It is either Brazil or Argentina. Messi or Neymar. A Brazilian win is celebrated as our own and a defeat casts a shadow of despair over the masses of football fans. While these things are a given, the question is: Why? Why is it Brazil and Argentina and not, say, Germany or Spain? Or even France or England?

Brazilian football, traditionally a working-class sport, is something the masses in Kolkata can identify with. Unlike Europe, where football is a full-fledged industry and academies and schools oversee the nurturing of talent, in both Brazil and Kolkata, given their economic conditions, such infrastructure is unthinkable. Unlike European stars—products of a sophisticated football nurturing system—Brazilian stars learn by playing in the streets and local parks and, in most cases, make their way to the top by relying on exceptional talent alone. Scientific training, proper diet, and systematic physical drills, part of the European footballing experience, have made Europe alien to most countries of South Asia. By contrast, Brazilian football involves skill, stamina, and passion, attributes the working classes in Kolkata possess. With most Brazilian stars, who soar from lower middle-class households to become world icons, the poor, underprivileged young man in Kolkata, in attempting to emulate them, can still dream of conquering the world with his limbs alone. This explains why Prasun Bhattacharya, the poor, hard-working, small-town boy in the much-acclaimed Moti Nandi novel *Striker* dreams about the secretary of the Santos Football Club offering him a contract, having come all the way from Brazil to his dingy urban house. This novel, published in 1973, a period when world football was being ruled by the Dutch under Cruyff and by the Germans under Beckenbauer, could have easily portrayed Bhattacharya dreaming of playing in a Dutch or German club. However, given the structure of football in Europe, such dreams are a remote possibility. With his background, having had the privilege of watching the legendary Brazilians of the 1950s and 1960s in action, it was "natural" for Moti Nandi to write about his hero dreaming of playing in a Brazilian football club.

Moti Nandi's reverence for Brazilian soccer is borne out by the opening pages of the novel. It opens with Prasun Bhattacharya, an aspiring young footballer, describing a dream he had the previous night. In his dream he had seen a middle-aged foreigner, wearing a white coat and trousers, stepping out of a limousine parked on the main road near his small-town house. Residents of his locality had never seen a limousine before. Accordingly, a crowd had gathered to see the car and gauge the reason behind the coming of the foreigner. When it became known that he had come to see Prasun, most people were stunned and at the same time happy to hear a local name on the foreigner's lips. The Brazilian, when asked what he wanted, mentioned that he was the secretary of the Santos Football Club and announced his intention to sign Prasun to play for the club in the coming season. Upon hearing this, one of the residents rushed in to inform Prasun's father about the offer, excited that the foreigner represented the club for which Pelé had played. Pelé is revered in this novel—proof enough of the iconic status this living legend enjoys in Bengal, and his power to extract adulation for his nation.

The best footballer to play in Kolkata, Pelé had done much to stimulate the city's adulation for Brazil. He had played in the city in 1977, as a member of the touring New York Cosmos. Though well past his prime, the nature of the reception accorded to Pelé and the frenzy that had gripped the soccer-crazy city on this occasion is proof of the reverence Kolkatans have for Brazilian soccer. The *Anandabazar Patrika* of September 23, 1977 described the visit thus: "Not merely as a king, but Kolkata has welcomed Pelé like a victorious emperor. Millions had stepped onto the streets to catch a glimpse of this legend at midnight on Thursday. Never before in this great city has such a crowd assembled as midnight to welcome a foreigner."

The heading of the report, 'Frenzied millions accord royal welcome', is indicative of the hysteria that had gripped the city. This visit of Pelé, one that had left a lasting impression on the city's people, had done much to intensify the city's adulation for Brazilian soccer. The visit made Pelé a household name in Kolkata, making him someone Kolkatans could identify with as one of their own. Even

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Courtesy THE HINDU ARCHIVES

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GETTY IMAGES

1. An alley painted in Brazil team colours, November 2022
2. Pelé in action against Mohun Bagan at the Eden Gardens, September 1977
3. Neymar graffiti

THE CITY WILL BE ROOTING FOR NEYMAR AND TITE AS BRAZIL TAKE THE FIELD IN QATAR TRYING TO WIN A RECORD SIXTH TITLE. AND IF THEY DO, WE COULD WELL SEE A REPEAT OF WHAT HAPPENED IN KOLKATA WHEN BRAZIL WON THE TITLE IN 2002

women, not particularly keen on soccer, had become fans of Pelé, reading about him regularly in the sport pages of the vernacular dailies. They did much to stimulate support for Brazil by transmitting stories of Pelé's visit to their children, moulding their young minds in favour of Brazil. Pelé's visit was followed in the 1980s by the visit of the São Paolo Football Club, a visit that generated considerable excitement and kept Brazil in the hearts and minds of Kolkatans.

The live telecast of the 1982 World Cup Football finals also played its part in advancing Brazil in the eyes of Kolkatans. Held just a few years after Pelé's visit, this World Cup final was the first sporting event televised live in India. After their tryst with Pelé, fans in Kolkata were rooting for Brazil, expecting something spectacular from their favourite footballing power. The Brazilian team boasting Sócrates, Zico and Falcão did not disappoint them and despite their second-round loss to Italy, is still regarded as one of the best Brazilian teams of all time.

It is no surprise then that the city will be rooting for Neymar and Tite as Brazil take field in Qatar trying to win a record sixth title. And if they do, we could well see a repeat of what happened in Kolkata when Brazil won the title in 2002. This is how the victory was reported in the Kolkata press the next day!

"India didn't play in the World Cup. But they won it on Sunday night on the streets of Kolkata. 'Bra..aazil'—some sang, others shouted and still others hugged friends in delight. One man—a wizard called Ronaldo—had made their day. Kolkata celebrated Brazil's record-breaking fifth World Cup victory as if there was no tomorrow, living up to its reputation of being a true soccer-crazy city. Their faces painted yellow and green, men and women danced on the aisles and on the streets in unmitigated glee. From Netaji Indoor Stadium, where thousands watched the match on a giant screen to Bosepukur, Sealdah, Bhowanipore and Rash Behari, the Samba kings ruled. '*Jai bolo guru Ronaldo holo boss*' (Hail Ronaldo, he is the king) said a woman who came to sell *muri-badam* outside the stadium. Kolkata's love for Brazil was inexplicable but ubiquitous. Without exception, the two sexes stood in unison saluting the best team in the world. For the moment, Kolkata had become the second capital of Brazil." ■

Air Apparent

Beijing's success in tackling pollution is a lesson for Delhi

I LIVED IN BEIJING between 2002 and 2009, a period of time when the city was the global poster boy for air pollution. Even aunties in Delhi would solicitously query me about the terrible air in China, with barely concealed schadenfreude—or "airenfreude"!—seemingly oblivious of the poison outside their own windows.

Having grown up in perennially polluted Delhi, smoggy skies were so unremarkable to me that I didn't even notice anything was awry in Beijing for years after moving there. Then, one spring morning in 2006, I looked outside of my central Beijing apartment at an apparition: a blue sky, punctuated by the sweep of rolling hills. For the year that I had lived in this apartment, the view from my study had only revealed the low rooftops of the courtyard homes that clustered around our complex. The appearance of the hills felt magical, except it was not magic, merely the absence of air pollution.

Before that moment, I don't think I had really "seen" the dirty air in China, unlike rich-country expats who had certainly muttered aplenty about the toxic air. But my reaction to these grumbles was initially akin to that of most Chinese themselves: dismissal as overblown first-world concerns. In China, as in India, the general attitude was to associate the grimy air with weather phenomena like fog and sandstorms, rather than pollution.

In Beijing, the tipping point that shifted the awareness of and attitude to air pollution was the 2008 Olympic Games hosted by the city. In the run-up, Beijing went into a construction overdrive to retool its infrastructure, plunging the capital into a years-long haze of construction dust. The Games also provided the perfect opportunity for foreign journalists to hold the Chinese authorities to account for their numerous failings, from media censorship to corruption. But pollution bestrode coverage of the event, dwarfing other matters. Beijing's air quality became the litmus test for the Communist Party's willingness to modify its policy of sacrificing all at the altar of economic growth.

BEIJING'S POOR AIR, like Delhi's, resulted from a compound of factors, ranging from vehicular to industrial sources. And again, like Delhi, it was exacerbated by unhelpful geography. The Chinese capital has mountain ranges to its north and west, which prevent the pollution drawn in from the industrial townships to its east and south from escaping. Also, low temperatures in the winter create an inversion layer, a phenomenon mirrored in Delhi, so that cold air bands get pressed under a warmer air mass, trapping pollutants close to the ground.

As I began to report on China's degraded environment, the parallel fact of Delhi's smoggy skies become harder for me to ignore. Every Christmas holiday, I'd returned home to putrid air that left my eyes smarting. Yet, if I raised the issue with friends, I was met with eye-rolling intended to indicate how much of a "foreigner" I had become. In fact, according to NASA satellite data, the levels of fine particulate matter had got worse across India by 13 per cent between 2010 and 2015, while China's fell by 17 per cent.

Channeling one's inner ostrich when it comes to air pollution is a universal affliction suffered by citizens of developing countries. To understand what from a rich country's perspective is our peculiar obduracy in reacting to air pollution, one must realise that many of us will die prematurely and/or suffer long years of bad health regardless of air pollution. We grapple with a long list of possible ills, including typhoid, dengue fever, and malnutrition, before becoming overly concerned with the cardiovascular implications of exposure to dirty air.

Yet, greater awareness can, when the information is dire enough, eventually lead to change: a process that by the time of the Olympics had clearly begun in China. The media attention garnered by air pollution made the dirty air visible to residents in a way that years of actually living with the heavy particulate matter had not.

Over the last decade, China has unexpectedly emerged as the global frontrunner in tackling dirty air. A report by the University of Chicago's Energy Policy Institute has shown that China reduced air pollution nearly as much in seven years—between 2013 and 2020—as the US did in three decades. The reduction in harmful particulates in the air during this time was 40 per cent.

Beijing achieved this by instituting a broad, "regionally coordinated" system of air pollution monitoring, installing high-tech pollution abatement equipment on a majority of its power plants, as well as devising means to restrict car ownership in major cities.

It's important to note that despite the widespread belief in India that the Chinese government has carte blanche to push through any reforms it likes, in fact, the ruling party is not a monolith. Making environmental protection a priority is an ongoing and conflicting process. Over the years, it met with considerable pushback from vested interests both within and outside the ruling party. And yet, Beijing persisted, partly as a response to civil society pressure from below and partly from an elite-driven realisation of the economic consequences of unchecked environmental damage.

The CCTV building behind the smog in Beijing, November 20, 2022

GETTY IMAGES

DESPITE BEING THE MAINSTAY OF CHINA'S ENERGY MIX, COAL-FIRED POWER PLANTS CAME UNDER THE HAMMER. IN MARCH 2017, THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED THE CLOSURE, OR CANCELLATION, OF 103 OF THESE PLANTS, WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN CAPABLE OF GENERATING MORE THAN 50 GIGAWATTS OF POWER IN TOTAL

Between 2012 and 2014, China installed some 1,400 pollution monitoring stations across 337 cities, covering roughly 98 per cent of the population. By 2017, 900 cities were covered. In 2014, China updated its environmental protection law to give local authorities the power to detain company bosses who didn't complete environmental impact assessments. The law also removed limits on the fines that firms could be subjected to for breaching pollution quotas.

China's pollution-fighting attempts were multi-pronged, but with a focus on heavy industry. Despite being the mainstay of China's energy mix, coal-fired power plants came under the hammer. In March 2017, the national government announced the closure, or cancellation, of 103 of these plants, which would have been capable of generating more than 50 gigawatts of power in total. Further, all new coal-fired power plants were mandated to be "ultra-low emissions", or about as clean as natural gas plants. To replace coal, China has been rolling out the world's biggest investment in wind and solar power.

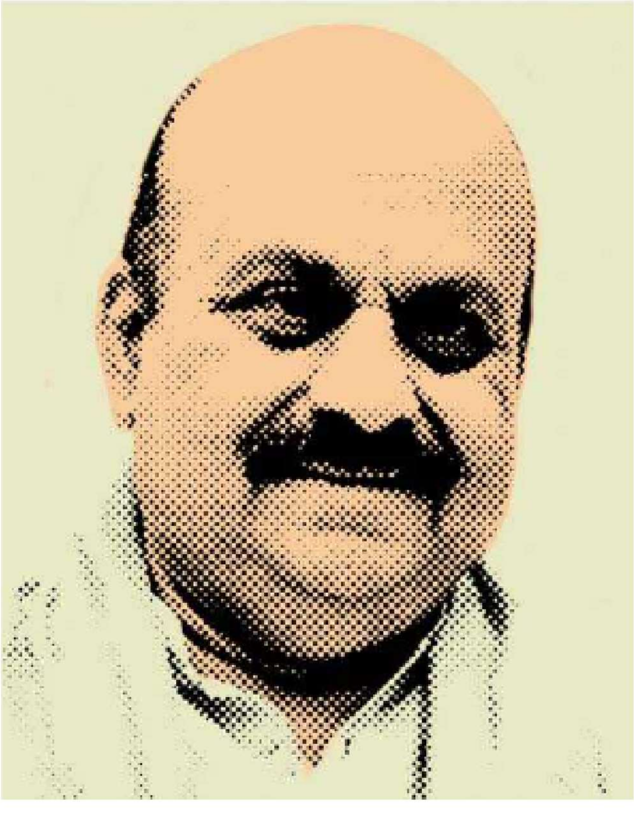
Vehicular pollution was not ignored. Measures to restrict car ownership were put in place in many cities. Beijingers, for example, can only buy a new car if they do not already have a vehicle registered under their name. They are then eligible to enter a monthly lottery for licence plates.

Finally, China learnt that for anti-pollution measures to be successful, they had to consider entire air sheds or zones within which air circulates. Although a few Indian cities (notably Delhi) have taken some anti-pollution actions, these are not coordinated at the regional level. But Beijing's experience with polluted neighbouring areas like Tianjin and Hebei has proved that unless the north Indian states of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan work in tandem with Delhi, even Herculean efforts by the capital city on its own will not prevent it from choking.

When I wrote my 2016 book *Choked!*, comparing air pollution in India-China, there seemed some hope that India was having its own "airwakening", with Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal at the helm, who suffered from respiratory disorders himself. But seven years on, despite rising awareness and a number of policy measures to tackle the problem, Delhi's air remains toxic. The average Air Quality Index (AQI) of October 2022 was 209 vs 173 in 2021, multiple times greater than Beijing's.

For India, China should remain the model to learn from when it comes to air. Beijing's experience shows that blue skies entail a tough, long slog that requires, among other elements, political will, civil society activism, commercial compliance, and bureaucratic incentives. There are no silver bullets. But air pollution is a man-made problem, with man-made solutions. It's tough to fix, but far from impossible. ■

Planning Smart



As the current round of Assembly elections progresses, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership is looking ahead to key electoral battles next year. Among them, the Karnataka election is already generating interest with BJP having brought about a generational change with Basavaraj Bommai as chief minister. There has been talk—spurred by the comments of a state leader—about "Gujarat-style" changes of incumbent MLAs and ministers. Some of this is seen as individual views and jockeying following a change of guard and the party's efforts to look to the future in terms of younger representatives. While there will be new faces, just as has been the case in other states where BJP is in office, sources emphasise that each state has its own 'model' and there is no one-size-fits-all formula. More attention should be paid to the government's efforts to widen its social base through concerted outreach to weaker sections like Dalits and tribals, with an increase in the quantum of reservation. There have also been rallies to organise these sections with the BJP central leadership assuring the Centre's support. Looking for ways to beat incumbency, caste mobilisation and organisational rejigs seem to be part of BJP's strategy.

YOUNG AUTEURS

THE ORGANISERS OF the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) are pleased with the response to the initiative to invite 75 young filmmakers to showcase their talent. There were more than 1,000 entries and the juries sat for close to 10 days to sort them and make the final selections. The entries have also used the MoJo app and submitted 5-10-minute films, with the technique changing the way films are made. The competitive element has seen filmmakers being given 45 hours to make documentaries of a certain specification and many took up the challenge. The idea was to provide a stage and networking experience to the talented youngsters drawn from all over the country. For example, the chance to meet the top creative teams of films like *RRR* is an opportunity not easy to come by. The easy availability of film production software on laptops and the use of mobiles have led to an explosion of creativity that goes beyond the reels on popular apps. Entries at the IFFI reflect a wide creative range, including perceptive stories of life in the hinterland to fictional representations and the use of special effects.

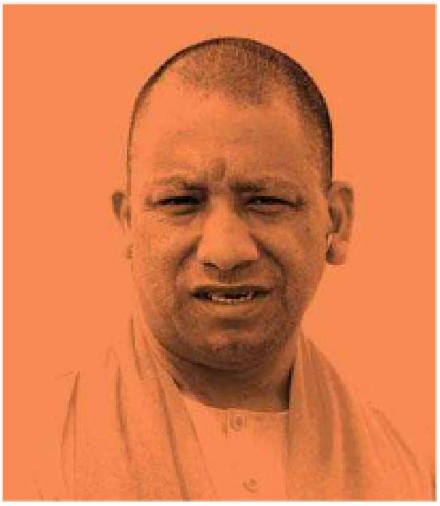
Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

AAP DOWN

With attention focused on the heat and dust of the Gujarat election, the curtain has dropped on Himachal Pradesh where candidates, parties and leaders await the counting of votes on December 8. With not much to do till then, commentators and commoners alike are trying to figure out how the polling went. The race, it would seem, remained largely bipolar between BJP and Congress, despite AAP's bid to make a debut in the hill state. The AAP leadership itself seemed to have given up along the way, preferring to concentrate on Gujarat. Many of the challenger's leading figures in the hill state joined BJP. After AAP's big win in Punjab, there were expectations that the party might look to make an impact in the neighbouring state. The interval between the Punjab victory and the subsequent round of state polls appears to have hurt AAP's prospects. Reports of a decline in Punjab's law and order as well as corruption allegations against senior AAP leaders in Delhi sowed doubts in the minds of voters, feel observers based in Himachal. This may result in the contest following the more traditional BJP vs Congress trajectory with the opposition raking up issues like the demand for the restoration of the old pension scheme and the new Agniveer recruitment system for the armed forces. In a state where *sarkari* jobs are sought after, both parties look to tap the sentiment. BJP leaders feel the rebellions caused by some seniors being denied the party ticket have been contained and factional bloodletting was also controlled. The trump card remained Prime Minister Narendra Modi's connect with the state and women voters in particular. He also made it a point to highlight the Centre's promise to recruit one million people in government jobs to assuage sentiments.

THE UP FACTOR

States have begun to pursue investor summits in right earnest and Uttar Pradesh (UP) is no exception. With the state climbing in NITI Aayog rankings in terms of infrastructure and ease of business, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is looking to bring business to the heartland state on a much larger scale than has been the case so far. The success of Noida as an electronics hub and the recent inauguration of a ₹ 5,000 crore mega data centre have encouraged the state government to set its target higher. Taking the initiative in his own hands, Adityanath addressed a curtain-raiser in Delhi this week and spoke of the state's plans to provide a welcoming climate for investors. Having won a second term with convincing numbers, he wants to get big initiatives rolling ahead of the next Lok Sabha polls. Though the next state election is still some time away, the chief minister is keenly aware of the high levels of expectations in the large state with strong caste faultlines that have been exploited by BJP's rivals Samajwadi Party and BSP. Keen to leave no openings for competitors and BJP's parliamentary majority hinging on a dominant performance in UP, Adityanath said UP had shown the capacity to implement infrastructure projects on a big scale. The development of the Jewar airport has been an eye-opener in this regard, not least for the smooth process of land acquisition not marred by litigation and agitations as in the case of projects in several states.



CLIMATE COMMITMENTS

THE COP27 conference at Sharm el-Sheikh, as has often been the case with climate change summits, went down to the wire with all sides testing each other's nerves. The cat-and-mouse games see the rich nations try and evade stronger and binding responsibilities and the less developed ones seek concessions they consider rightfully due. India finds itself under pressure to take on more commitments although it is a victim of Western fossil-fuel splurging and even as its per capita emissions are on the lower side. Although the final text did not include a specific reference to the need to reduce all fossil fuels, the issue is now on the global table thanks to India's persistence. While the breakthrough "loss and damage" fund might see demands that India contribute to compensating smaller and poorer nations, China will feel the heat as one of the world's biggest emitters. Its attempts to scale down coal power had to be given up due to resultant energy shortages and higher prices. Moreover, its attempt to park itself in the 'developing nations' corner is being increasingly questioned. It does seem that China's size and energy production and consumption will put its actions under more scrutiny as both the developed and the least developed nations seek commitments as well as funds from Beijing.

COP27
SHARM EL-SHEIKH
EGYPT 2022

By RAJEEV SRINIVASAN

USEFUL DISRUPTION

Will the churn in Big Tech lead to a new period of innovation?

THE RECENT NEWS about Big Tech is ominous: lower revenues and profits at several; large layoffs at some. If you add Fintech to the mix (appropriate because a lot of Fintech is based on technology-heavy blockchains and cryptocurrencies), then the collapse of crypto-exchanges is another dramatic event. There are two questions of interest: Are there any connections? And what does this mean for you and me?

After a dream run for several years, Big Tech has recently taken a beating. The FAANGs—Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google—have had a few setbacks; in fact, Netflix has fallen out of this set altogether; the new grouping is Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, according to *The Economist* which reported on November 5 that these firms had collectively lost 37 per cent of their market cap, a staggering $3.7 trillion (although there has been a market uptick after this data was published). Meta in particular had taken a big hit, losing 74 per cent of its value.

Data published by *Financial Times* (see table) show that revenue growth has slowed, and stock prices have declined, though they have recovered a little.

Add to that the volatility in cryptocurrencies, with the spectacular meltdown of the FTX exchange and yet another fall in both the value of the currencies as well as in the public's trust in them. So dramatic has this been that people are talking about a Lehman Brothers moment, comparing it to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09. The implication is that big players failed, and that taxpayers may be forced to bail them out.

But that's a bit of a stretch, because cryptocurrencies are not significant as a fraction of global financial transactions. Besides, as a thought experiment, even if they were to disappear, the impact would be limited; it would affect risk-seeking private investors (and apparently there are quite a few in India), but not the average man on the street.

In passing, the FTX debacle may be no more than an instance of bad governance and lack of oversight, as inappropriate internal loans tripped them up: founder Sam Bankman-Fried seems to have unwisely lent customer funds to his trading arm Alameda Research which made risky investments that blew up.

A better analogy for the crypto crash may be the dot-com crash of 2000, which many may have forgotten. Then, too, there was a new technology in the offing—the internet—which true believers claimed would be the greatest thing since sliced bread. Sceptics had pointed out that there was no actual money in it, although there were eyeballs. They pointed to such signal failures as Webvan, Pets.com, and so on.

In a similar fashion, one could posit that cryptocurrencies simply haven't found their niche, and that they are facing teething troubles. Maybe killer applications will materialise, and just as the internet has become mainstream, so will cryptocurrencies. Maybe the future giants of the crypto era are just getting their acts together.

There is some merit to that argument because the business model that made internet firms successful so far has been a Faustian bargain they drove with us customers: we allow them to plunder our personal data, and in return they give us, for 'free', goodies like email and social media. Think Google, or Facebook: they make all their revenue on ads, which means, of course, that you, gentle reader, are the product. So much for ownership and privacy.

Meta
Microsoft
Alphabet

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

> WHAT WE ARE SEEING IS NOT THE END OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION. IT IS ONLY A HICCUP IN THE FORTUNES OF TODAY'S LEADERS. AND THAT IS A GOOD THING, TOO, BECAUSE THE BEST HEADS IN SILICON VALLEY HAVE BEEN RACKING THEIR BRAINS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT NOT SOMETHING USEFUL BUT MORE AND MORE CREATIVE WAYS TO GRAB AND KEEP YOUR ATTENTION. THAT IS A DEAD END; IT'S TIME FOR SOME *NEW* NEW THING. A DESIRABLE OUTCOME IS THAT THE CURRENT FLUX OPENS UP NEW AVENUES FOR INDIAN TECHNOLOGISTS

There is also the matter of the very architecture of control of society. The promise of Web 3.0, DAOs (Decentralised Autonomous Organisations), DeFi (Decentralised Finance), cryptocurrencies and blockchains is related to decentralisation and distribution of control. In contrast to monolithic and hierarchical societies and financial structures, the idea of more robust, distributed systems appeals, and not only to libertarians. The contra-example of centralised states like China is instructive. They can be brutal.

Combine decentralisation with pseudonymous, geographically distributed entities, and you get something along the lines of *Network States*, as in the book by techno-visionary Balaji Srinivasan. He imagines groups that live anywhere in the world, where a member's only public identity is their work product and skills, offering their services on a gig-economy basis, transacting in cryptocurrencies, outside the ambit of nation-states and central banks.

Such a vision, frankly, is not so alien to Indians because we have built one of the most distributed, and thus robust, societies in the world. In an earlier era, these proto-'network states' were called *jatis*. They were not quite as radical, admittedly, as Balaji's, and there are analogues elsewhere, as in the medieval merchants' guilds of Europe's Hanseatic League.

Some ingredients for such radically restructured societies exist today, and there are already clusters of footloose 'digital nomads' who may live anywhere. As a result, despite the advantages of Silicon Valley, clusters have developed in the US in Austin, Texas; Miami, Florida; Denver, Colorado; and even in the much-derided Rust Belt.

Similarly, it is not hard to imagine 'network statelets' self-organising in India outside the big centres like Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai and the National Capital Region. That would be a good thing for a variety of obvious reasons. Sridhar Vembu's Zoho community in remote rural Tenkasi, Tamil Nadu, could be a prototype of this to an extent.

Network states would be just one of the futures made possible as a result of the maturing of the emergent ecosystem around various new technologies. Of course, Mark Zuckerberg of Meta is betting the farm on a different technology, metaverses and virtual worlds, although I personally don't find that quite as compelling as the network-state vision.

In some sense, we are in the 'pre-paradigmatic' state of software platform technology evolution that David Teece of UC Berkeley outlined years ago: there are different models and visions of the future in contention, and we do not yet know which of them will become the standard.

There is another way of looking at the current chaos: that is Harvard academic Clayton Christensen's idea of "the failure of leading firms". As the exponent of the theory of disruptive innovation, he points out ways in which incumbent firms that look unbeatable can be disrupted and overthrown by insurgent firms, or fail due to changes in the ecosystem or environment.

This may well be happening to Big Tech firms as they mature: after all, they are living in Internet Time, so their life cycles are possibly compressed. This is only the latest wave of creative destruction in the technology industry that has toppled giants. In the 1990s, Silicon Valley viewed IBM as The Enemy, but it is no longer a threat; and there were stalwarts like DEC, Silicon Graphics, Sun Microsystems, etc that don't even exist anymore, as well as the fallen like HP.

THERE IS ANOTHER issue: the rise of online media. It is not clear that anybody anticipated this side-effect of the growth of the internet. As an early user of ARPANET, I remember using things such as FTP, the file-transfer protocol: it was a bit tedious to move information around. As an example, you had to specify your path in detail: for instance, my email id was ihnp4!ucbvax!sun!rajeev and ihnp4!btlunix!summit!pundit!rajeev at different times.

There was Usenet, an early 'social medium' where there were newsgroups such as net.nlang.indian and later soc.culture.indian, on which we tangled on all sorts of things related to India. There were raging 'flame-wars', and some people gained a certain level of notoriety. But usage, on average, was confined to graduate students, especially in the sciences.

There were also email aliases for discussions on various topics. I ran an internal group at Sun Microsystems titled "indians@sun", and if the discussions got too heated, I'd simply turn off the alias for a bit: a crude sort of 'moderation', I suppose.

In those days, we could not have imagined that one day social media would become so important and print media would be eclipsed to such an extent that policy debates, major announcements, and alleged subversion of elections would be run on platforms like Twitter.

The massive layoffs at Twitter are more bad news from Big Tech. In the past, people used their newspapers to influence events: for example, tycoon William Randolph Hearst is rumoured to have precipitated the Spanish-American War to gain ratings for his papers. Jeff Bezos of Amazon bought the *Washington Post*. Laurene Powell Jobs, the widow of Steve Jobs, bought the *Atlantic*.

But the world's richest man, Elon Musk, bought Twitter, the digital public square, and promptly laid off half the staff, including 90 per cent in India. Twitter has long been accused of being leftwing, and a regular censor of anything that didn't fit its partisan view.

The fact that technology now dominates not only finance but also media, and thus freedom of expression, shows the extent to which a technocalypse would affect all of us. The churn at Twitter, or at Meta, doesn't mean we have reached the end of the road in this direction. The worst case would be total mind control as happens in the Chinese super-apps such as Alibaba's and Tencent's: their government is able to assign an Orwellian 'social score' to an individual.

There should be a via media—it surely is possible to figure out a way in which freedom of expression is extended to all, but at the same truly toxic speech is restricted. At the moment

GOLIATHS IN TROUBLE

Name	Alphabet	Amazon	Apple	Meta	Microsft	Netflix
Price	$86	$90	$138	$90	$221	$260
Price decline from 2021 high	43%	52%	24%	76%	37%	63%
Forward price/earnings	17	64	22	13	22	28
Revenue growth, last 12 months	18%	10%	8%	5%	15%	10%
Revenue growth, 10-year CAGR	20%	24%	10%	38%	11%	24%
Free cash flow margin, 5 year average	21%	4%	24%	25%	30%	-4%
Gross profit/assets	44%	50%	48%	53%	39%	26%

Source: S&P CapitalIQ

FOR SEVERAL REASONS, THE OBITUARIES OF TECHNOLOGY ARE A BIT PREMATURE, AS MARK TWAIN ONCE SAID. ACCELERATED CHANGES BROUGHT ABOUT BY TECHNOLOGY ARE GOING TO BE WITH US ALL FOR A WHILE. SOME SPECIFIC COMPANIES ARE IN TROUBLE; OTHERS MAY YET PULL THROUGH, FOR EXAMPLE, BY PIVOTING AS MICROSOFT AND AMAZON BOTH DID WITH THEIR MOVE TO THE CLOUD

MARK ZUCKERBERG

> THE FACT THAT TECHNOLOGY NOW DOMINATES NOT ONLY FINANCE BUT ALSO MEDIA, AND THUS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, SHOWS THE EXTENT TO WHICH A TECHNOCALYPSE WOULD AFFECT ALL OF US. THE CHURN AT TWITTER, OR AT META, DOESN'T MEAN WE HAVE REACHED THE END OF THE ROAD IN THIS DIRECTION. THE WORST CASE WOULD BE TOTAL MIND CONTROL AS HAPPENS IN THE CHINESE SUPER-APPS, SUCH AS ALIBABA'S AND TENCENT'S: THEIR GOVERNMENT IS ABLE TO ASSIGN AN ORWELLIAN 'SOCIAL SCORE' TO AN INDIVIDUAL

there is no technological solution in sight. But surely, necessity is the mother of invention, and someone will come up with a clever solution, likely using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML). (To be honest though, AI-mediated bias is still a problem, as described in the book *Weapons of Math Destruction* by Cathy O'Neil.)

Thus, for several reasons, the obituaries of technology are a bit premature, as Mark Twain once said. Accelerated changes brought about by technology are going to be with us all for a while. Some specific companies are in trouble; others may yet pull through, for example, by pivoting as Microsoft and Amazon both did with their move to the cloud.

A desirable outcome is that the current flux in technology in Silicon Valley opens up new avenues for Indian technologists. As an example, the Web 2.0 business model of ad-supported revenue is now long in the tooth, and there is a crying need for a Web 3.0 model with a way of monetising the value offered to and by users. The Big Tech Silicon Valley companies are Web 2.0-based, and are ripe for disruption.

It is possible to imagine a distributed Web 3.0 business model where the end user actually gets paid for any content he/she creates, but conversely pays for services received, such as mail or a VPN. The user data is not harvested by the platform owner, but the user is free to sell his information to anyone he feels like, and the data indubitably belongs to the user. The DuckDuckGo search engine is a partial step in this direction.

Such a model might work well in India where the super-app experiment (classic Web 2.0) has failed so far. A super-app is a walled garden which offers the user almost all the functionality that they might need, and Alibaba and Tencent have profited handsomely from this one-stop shopping. A user never needs to leave the platform, because in addition to payments, they offer loans, insurance, ticketing, mutual funds and more services through an army of third parties.

Alibaba was hoping to offer something along the same lines in India via its investment in Paytm, but the level-playing field offered by Unified Payments Interface (UPI) negated Paytm's early advantage, and restrictions on Chinese funding of Indian companies have put a crimp in that plan. Tata, Reliance, and WhatsApp are all either rumoured to be, or have announced, their super-app plans.

The trade-off for this convenience, of course, is the centralisation of data. India already has, via Aadhaar and UPI, and perhaps other mechanisms, quite a centralised system, although that is under the control of the government. A Web 2.0 super-app may not be the answer here, and it may not be good for users either.

A better approach might be to start with a clean slate and build a distributed Web 3.0 ecosystem. This needs to be thought through; and clever Indian entrepreneurs may well be the right people to do it. In that case, the current pause in what was the hitherto unstoppable march of US Big Tech may well be a boon to the Indian technology ecosystem. Users might, alas, have to pay for what is currently 'free'; but they would get to keep their private data.

Even otherwise, what we are seeing is not the end of technological innovation. It is only a hiccup in the fortunes of today's leaders. And that is a good thing, too, because the best heads in Silicon Valley have been racking their brains trying to figure out not something useful but more and more creative ways to grab and keep your attention. That is a dead end; it's time for some *new* New Thing.

If it leads to a new flowering of innovation—by past experience it should—that would be a good thing for all of us. ■

Rajeev Srinivasan worked at Bell Labs and in Silicon Valley. He writes on the impact of technology on society

Of Love and Oth

The gruesome murder of Shraddha Walkar by her

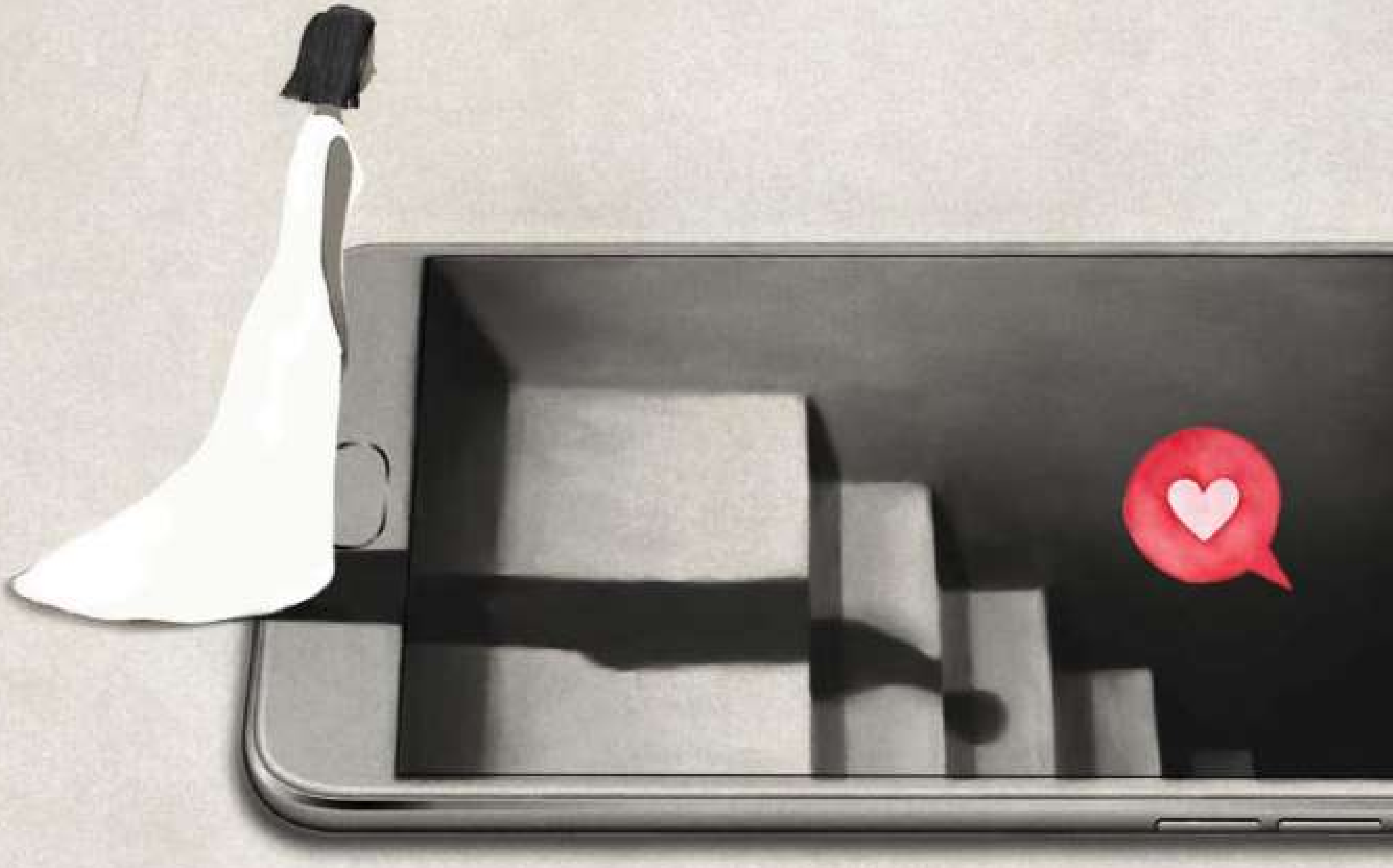


Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

er Demons

lover brings out the dark side of dating apps

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

Late one night back in 2019, Shweta (name changed on request) sat alert on a chair, her eyes transfixed in horror by her phone. From a message in her WhatsApp account she could see the live location of a man she had escaped from just hours earlier circling around the locality in Delhi where she lived. He would call repeatedly, and whenever Shweta gathered the courage to answer, his words would be filled with threat.

"Wait till I find you!" he would scream with expletives, again and again.

Shweta had encountered this man first on the dating app Bumble, and only hours earlier, wriggled herself out of an unpleasant date with him. He knew the locality where she lived, but mercifully not her exact building. And now he was back in the area, prowling the neighbourhood, looking for her.

"I don't think I will ever forget that night," Shweta says. "How scared I was, how vulnerable I felt."

Outside her apartment, Shweta sometimes felt she could hear the sound of his car noisily searching for her. She sat on the chair, holding her phone through the night, until she dropped off to sleep.

"When I hear about the case of that man who murdered his girlfriend [the murder of Shraddha Walkar by her partner Aftab Poonawalla], this is the encounter that keeps returning to my mind," Shweta says. "Had he found out where I lived that night, I don't know what he would have done to me."

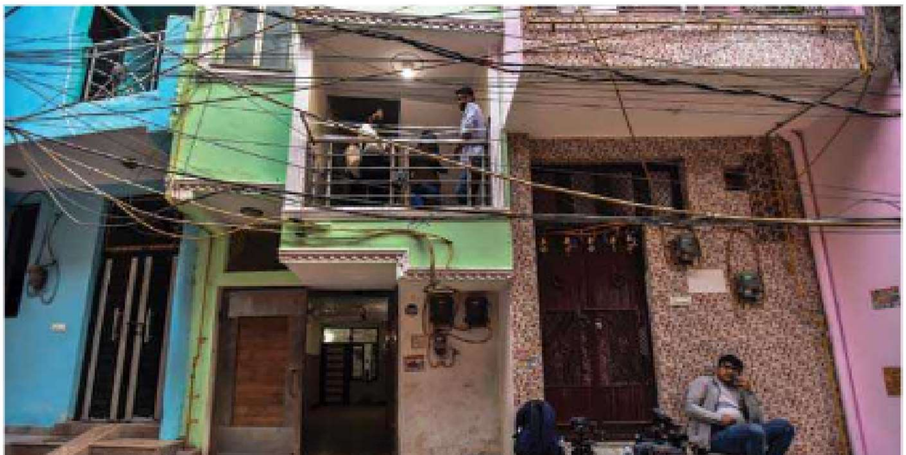
Dating apps, which first made their way into the world through Tinder in 2012, entered India a short while later. Within a few years, a number of both foreign and Indian apps popped up on mobile screens, quietly transforming the way people look for love in India. These apps first saw large adoption in the big metro cities and are now growing rapidly in smaller towns and cities, the enforced social distancing rules of the pandemic bringing in an even bigger surge of youths to these platforms.

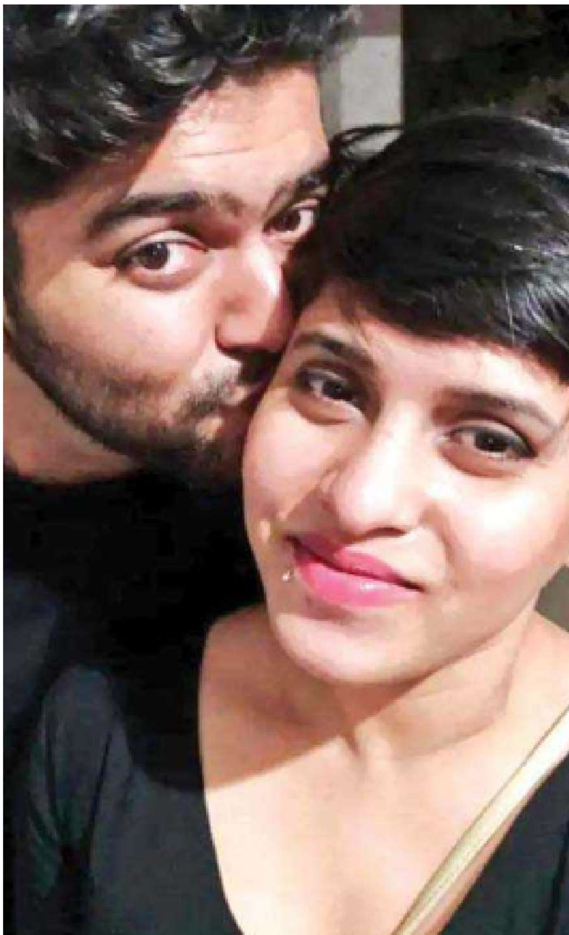
While these apps have given young people the freedom to find love in ways that weren't possible before, there has also always been a dark side to them. It has replicated the familiar seedy Indian street of catcalls and lascivious men on the web. Users, especially women, have for long complained about the proliferation of fake profiles, the abusive and creepy behaviour encountered on these platforms, the many scams, and the general bad behaviour, and sometimes even assault, when they go out on dates.

The fact that Aftab Poonawalla first met his partner Shraddha Walkar on Bumble may be incidental. Abuse and murders have after all occurred in relationships where individuals met under conventional circumstances too. But the gory details of this case—the alleged abuse throughout the relationship, the dismemberment of the corpse, and how, as media reports claim, Poonawalla returned to the dating app and even brought home one or more dates while parts of Walkar's dismembered body still remained in the fridge—have tinged these platforms with a sense of the macabre. A dating app's association with the case has brought the platforms under the kind of scrutiny they have rarely been subjected to before in India.

"I have three patients, all women in their 20s, who are on these platforms," says Rajat Mitra, a well-known clinical psychologist in Delhi. "And each one of them is scared since the details of this case came out." In fact, one of Mitra's patients is trapped in an abusive relationship with a man she met on a dating app.

> The fact that Aftab Poonawalla first met Shraddha Walkar on Bumble may be incidental. Abuse and murders have after all occurred in relationships where individuals met under conventional circumstances too. But a dating app's association with the case has brought the platforms under the kind of scrutiny they have rarely been subjected to in India





The house where Aftab Poonawalla allegedly murdered Shraddha Walkar (left); Aftab and Shraddha

Mitra has spent years interviewing sex offenders in Delhi's Tihar Jail and is one of the few psychologists in India to have closely studied them to understand the motivations behind their attacks. "Cutting a body and stuffing it in a fridge, then bringing a woman home—these, from a psychoanalytic point of view, are all erotically charged acts. It is part of a sexual fantasy. It hasn't happened by chance or default. It happened because he wanted it to happen," he says about Poonawala.

Shweta had agreed to meet this individual because, she says, he had appeared pleasant online. Like many women, she makes an effort to scrutinise the men she encounters before agreeing to a date. "This guy was working for a good IT firm, and when we chatted, he came across as respectful and decent," she says. A first date passed without incident. On the second, when he proposed they meet at his friend's house, she agreed. This friend turned out to be a single mother whom, Shweta now suspects, the man was interested in romantically. "It was all very strange. It was just meant to be a fun evening, hanging out and having a few drinks. But at first he began to make moves on that woman, and then once he started drinking, he completely changed. He started getting aggressive, and then began to phone some old ex [girlfriend] whom he abused in filthy language. It was so unpleasant and, making an excuse, I got away," she says.

Later, the other woman called her, telling her he was refusing to leave the place. "When she finally managed to throw him out, he began to think I was to blame, and began to look for me," Shweta says. "He was the kind of man you take pains to not encounter, and here I was, right in the middle of one such date."

Shweta hails from a conservative family in a small city in Rajasthan. Now living alone in Delhi as a film researcher, she is considered something of an anomaly in her family for her lifestyle and for remaining unmarried in her 30s. She swears off these dating apps for months, especially when something unpleasant occurs, she says, but always ends up returning, driven by the fear that she may miss out on a genuine long-term partner. So far, there have been more misses than hits. She once met a 19-year-old posing as someone older, another who turned out to be secretly married, and, in one case, she had to stay up all night because the individual she thought was harmless and had invited home on her birthday, demanded sex. "He was one of those sorts who keep pushing you no matter how often you decline. So I couldn't fall asleep because he might try doing something," she says.

Shweta isn't alone. A 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that 60 per cent of female users of dating apps between the ages of 18 and 34 in the US said someone continued to contact them after they said they weren't interested, and 57 per cent reported having received unwanted sexually explicit texts or images. Another survey, published by the Australian Institute of Criminology last month, found that three-quarters of users of dating apps reported being victims of some form of online sexual violence in the past five years. One-third experienced in-person abuse from someone they met on an app, with 27 per cent of those reporting incidents of sexual assault or coercion, such as drink spiking.

One of Shweta's dates did turn into a long relationship that lasted over six years and the two got engaged. But he was a controlling and toxic figure, she says, and when he once struck her over some minor matter, she broke up with him. "Despite these experiences, I keep returning. Because this is the most likely place today where you might end up finding someone you like," she says.

Anu, a 28-year-old marketing professional in Bengaluru (name changed on request), describes how she and her friends screen their matches on these apps very carefully, scrutinising their bios and social media profiles for telltale signs of aggression, before agreeing to a date. "We chat for weeks, scrutinise profiles intensely before agreeing to meet. But we have to keep reminding ourselves that however

"CUTTING A BODY AND STUFFING IT IN A FRIDGE, THEN BRINGING A WOMAN HOME—THESE, FROM A PSYCHOANALYTIC POINT OF VIEW, ARE ALL EROTICALLY CHARGED ACTS. IT IS PART OF A SEXUAL FANTASY. IT HASN'T HAPPENED BY CHANCE. IT HAPPENED BECAUSE HE WANTED IT TO HAPPEN"

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SNEHIL KHANOR
CEO and co-founder
TrulyMadly

“DATING HAS ALWAYS BEEN ASPIRATIONAL. WE HAD TO WAIT FOR EVERYTHING TO COME TOGETHER FOR DATING APPS TO WORK. BUT WE WILL JUST HAVE TO ACCEPT ABUSE HAPPENS ON DATING APPS AS WELL. WE WILL HAVE TO WORK HARDER TO WIN TRUST”

ABLE JOSEPH
CEO and founder Aisle

“THESE APPS APPEAR TO DISRUPT GENDER NORMS BY GIVING WOMEN A SENSE OF POWER, BUT THEY STILL REPRODUCE GENDER POWER NORMS YOU SEE ELSEWHERE IN SOCIETY. MOST WOMEN DON’T REVEAL THEY ARE ON THESE PLATFORMS BECAUSE THERE IS A STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH BEING ON THEM”

PIYALI SUR
sociologist

Protesters demand the

long you have been chatting with someone, online conversations only give you a mirage of familiarity. You are really meeting a stranger.”

Every date for a woman, Anu says, is a leap of faith. “For a guy, at worst, it will turn out to be a bad date. For a woman, it could mean assault or even rape,” she says.

In India, the power to choose a marriage partner has traditionally rested with the parent. When the internet arrived, they carried this authority onto the web, setting up the profiles of their sons and daughters on matrimonial websites and vetting the proposals received. A small minority of progressive parents may have solicited inputs from their children. But for the vast majority, the power always lay with the parent, whose choice was often governed by considerations of caste, status and wealth, and not always by their son’s or daughter’s happiness.

The dating app transformed that power system. It took the power away from the parents and handed it to their sons and daughters. It is their adult children now, with few simple right and left swipes, determining whom they are interested in and not, or even if they want to be in committed or casual relationships. Such freedom, especially for women, has rarely, if ever, existed. It is easy to see why dating apps, in less than a decade, have become so popular.

According to Snehil Khanor, CEO and co-founder of the dating app TrulyMadly, Indian society is going through a churn. “The relationship dynamics have changed. There are no set gender roles anymore. Both men and women are responsible for income generation, taking care of the house and kids. So, when relationships have changed so drastically, obviously the means for people to find each other is also bound to change,” he says.

When Samuel (name changed on request) returned to his hometown in West Bengal two years ago after living in the US for nearly two decades, he found the town

death penalty for Poonawalla (left); Poonwalla in police custody, November 17, 2022

unrecognisable. A US citizen now, whose marriage had broken a few years ago, he came back to live with his parents during the pandemic. He realised just how much had changed, he says, when he turned on the dating apps he had on his phone. "I was just so surprised because it looked like everybody who was single in the town was on these apps," he says. "There was never such an avenue or modern outlook to dating before."

Samuel had begun to go out on dates using these apps in the US, once his marriage had ended, but none of it had materialised into anything concrete. "When I found the apps being used here, I thought, perhaps the people, especially women, would try to ensure that these dates led to some kind of committed relationships," he says. "But it's not like that at all. I found all sorts, some who didn't want a serious relationship because they were too young, or too focused on their careers," he says.

Samuel's experience is reflective of the way dating apps are now rapidly spreading through the country's smaller towns and cities. To tap into this new emerging market, these apps are also coming in vernacular languages. For instance, TrulyMadly that has a user base of 11 million, now also has 13 versions of the app in different languages. Aisle, another popular dating app with over 15 million users, has four regional apps.

"Dating has always been aspirational," says Able Joseph, CEO and founder of Aisle. "We had to wait for everything to come together for it [dating apps] to work, from [social media] creators creating new type of content, Bollywood switching around its stories, more women joining the workforce and taking control of their lives, to the building of trust in technology and the excitement generated when foreign dating apps started coming in around 2015 and 2016."

Joseph admits that it would be unfair to say dating apps are particularly unsafe since abuse occurs even in relationships where partners meet offline. "But we will just have to accept it happens on dating apps as well. We will have to work harder to win trust," he says.

It isn't women alone who find themselves at the centre of abuse online. Four years ago, when Deepika Bhardwaj began to hear the story of a woman who had killed a man she had met on Tinder in Jaipur, she got in a car in Delhi and rushed to the city. Bhardwaj is a documentary filmmaker whose work often focuses on the plight of men falsely accused of dowry and rape. "I'm interested in stories where the gender [of crime as we expect] is reversed," she says.

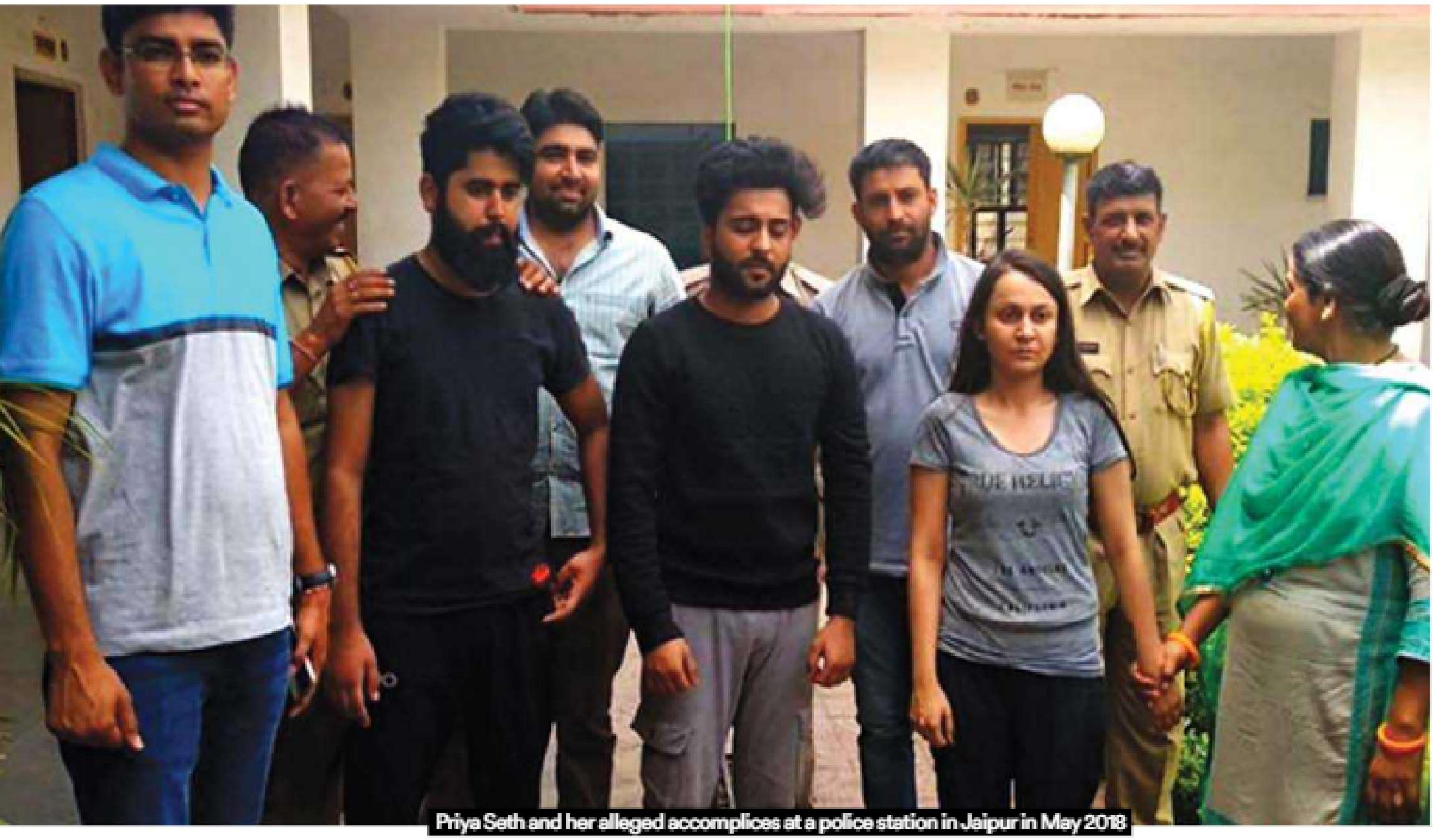
Bhardwaj was pursuing the story of the then 27-year-old Priya Seth, who allegedly swindled men by promising to provide sex workers from an escort agency. She had now, along with her boyfriend, as the allegation goes, devised a plan to find someone rich on Tinder to kidnap. To his misfortune, Dushyant Sharma, also operating on his own set of lies—giving his name as Vivan Kohli and describing himself as a rich businessman, when he was already married and belonged to a middle-class family—swiped right on her profile. When they realised their mistake after kidnapping him, the police say, Seth, her boyfriend Dikshant Kamra, and a friend named Lakshya Wallia, murdered Sharma, stuffed the corpse into a suitcase and dumped it on the Delhi-Jaipur highway.

For a week after the murder, the local press was full of stories on Seth, her lack of remorse, and her addiction to a fine life of luxury and branded clothes. After meeting the victim's father, on a lark, Bhardwaj decided she would try her luck and see if she could get the police to talk about the case too. "But when I entered the police station, I saw Priya sitting among a group of policemen and laughing about something. My heart just sank then," Bhardwaj says. Apart from the policemen, Bhardwaj also managed to get Seth and the two men to discuss their motivations on video, which she later released as a short film on YouTube.

"The two men had some kind of remorse and seemed aware of the repercussions. But not her. At one point, she asked me why everyone was acting like this was the first murder in the country," Bhardwaj recalls.

In the recording, while all three agree they were involved in the kidnapping, Seth pins the blame for the act of murder on her male accomplices while the two say the whole thing was planned by Seth. What is remarkable about Seth is her composure. Built slightly with long flowing hair, she smiles often, and occasionally even breaks into laughter as she recounts how she met Sharma on Tinder. The only time she becomes visibly agitated is when Bhardwaj asks about how she extorted money from

Then 27-year-old Priya Seth allegedly swindled men by promising to provide sex workers from an escort agency. She had, as the allegation goes, devised a plan to find someone rich on Tinder to kidnap. To his misfortune, Dushyant Sharma, operating on his own set of lies—giving his name as Vivan Kohli and describing himself as a rich businessman when he was already married and belonged to a middle-class family—swiped right on her profile



Priya Seth and her alleged accomplices at a police station in Jaipur in May 2018

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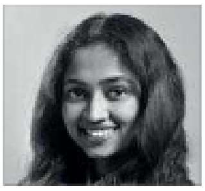
"NONE OF THE STEPS TO AUTHENTICATE YOUR PROFILE IS MANDATORY. AND YOU FIND A LOT OF FAKE PROFILES ON THESE PLATFORMS. EVEN DELHI POLICE HAD COME UP WITH PANIC BUTTON APPS. BUT DATING APPS WHICH HAVE THE RESOURCES HAVEN'T TAKEN SUCH A STEP"

MALAVIKA RAJKUMAR
lawyer



"A VICTIM HAD MET A 19-YEAR-OLD GIRL ON A DATE, HAD CONSENSUAL SEX, AND HAD EVEN DROPPED HER HOME. LATER, HE BEGAN GETTING CALLS FROM AN ALLEGED NGO WORKER AND A MAN WHO CLAIMED TO BE HER LAWYER, TELLING HIM THEY WOULD FILE A CASE AGAINST HIM"

DEEPIKA BHARDWAJ
documentary filmmaker

men earlier by posing as someone who ran an escort agency. "That is not extortion," she tells Bhardwaj. "To me, by taking the money of these men who were married, I was doing a social service."

There have been several cases of men who have been victims of extortion stemming from dating apps. Earlier this year, a Pune-based IT professional reached out to Bhardwaj for help. "He had met a 19-year-old girl on a date, had consensual sex, and had even dropped her home. But later, he began getting calls from an alleged NGO worker and a man who claimed to be her lawyer, telling him they would file a case against him and pushing him to meet them," says Bhardwaj, suggesting that this was some kind of scheme to extort money.

Last December, a man, who claimed he was being blackmailed by a woman he had had consensual sex with after meeting her on a dating app, had reached out to Bhardwaj. As Bhardwaj began to look into the case, she says, she found out that this woman, a 22-year-old college student in Delhi named Ayushi Bhatia had been running a similar racket for some time. "She had filed nine cases of rape against different men in 2021," Bhardwaj says. Bhatia would allegedly entrap her victims by making their acquaintance either online or at parties, and had met at least three of them on dating apps. Approaching senior police officials and the Haryana State Commission for Women, Bhardwaj had Bhatia arrested in December last year.

It could still be argued that dating apps in a country like India empower women. "But it's more complicated. These apps appear to disrupt gender norms by giving women a sense of power, but they still reproduce gender power norms you see elsewhere in society," says Piyali Sur, a professor of sociology at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. "What I found is that most women don't reveal they are on these platforms because there is a stigma associated with being on them. And most men on these platforms, while interested in the women they encounter, also look down upon them as 'easy women'."

Sur, who published a paper last year looking at women's experiences on dating apps in the online journal *Mainstream Weekly*, says that dating apps may provide opportunities to women to 'take charge' sexually but it exists within a wider context of persistent coercion and inequality. "The women I interviewed were extremely cautious on these platforms. They were afraid of being slut-shamed. One of them had a friend who had been sexually assaulted by a man she had met on a dating app. Another, a bisexual, didn't write about her orientation for fear of being subjected to creepy sexual propositions," she says.

Many of these platforms have introduced features to make them safer. Most dating apps have algorithms that can detect suspicious or abusive words in chats. A majority of them also encourage users to authenticate their profiles by providing more information like phone numbers, social media accounts and photo IDs. "But none of this is mandatory," says Malavika Rajkumar, a lawyer and project associate with the NGO IT for Change. "And you find a lot of fake profiles on these platforms."

Rajkumar points out that some apps like Bumble have put together a good list of resources and helpline numbers on their platform, but there is nothing by way of an emergency feature that could set off an alarm to a contact or nearby police station when faced with danger. "Even Delhi Police had come up with panic button apps. But dating apps which have the resources haven't taken such a step," she says.

Users can also report profiles. But redress is shrouded in a cloak of secrecy and a blocked individual can create a new account using a new phone number.

Back in 2019, when Shweta managed to escape from her date, she reported the individual and had him removed from various dating apps. Last year, she noticed he was back on one of them. "I reported him again. But it makes you wonder if it is even worth it." ■

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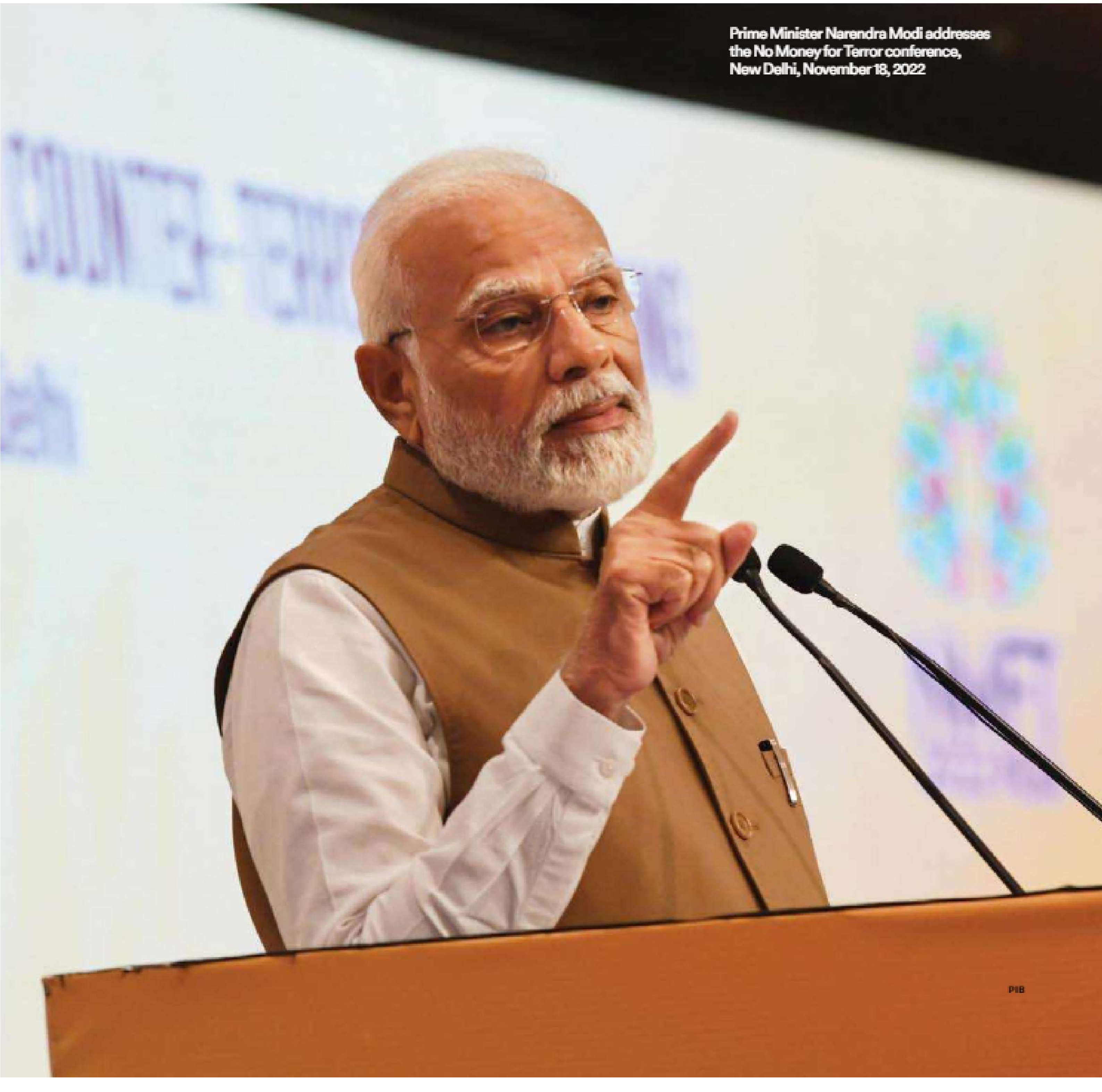
UNITED AGAIN

A series of high-profile conferences in New Delhi sees a wider acceptance of India's concerns and strategies

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the No Money for Terror conference, New Delhi, November 18, 2022

PIB

ST TERROR

MID-OCTOBER ONWARDS, NEW DELHI hosted no fewer than three international conferences to discuss the need to identify, define and contain terrorism in the age of new technologies, and to suppress money-laundering for criminal purposes that often ends up funding terrorists and terror organisations. A meeting of the General Assembly of the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol) was followed by the deliberations of the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), and more recently India hosted the third No Money for Terror (NMFT) ministerial conference attended by 93 nations and organisations. The conferences spelt a bigger profile for India on the global stage on issues that are often politically contested and sometimes enmeshed in legal definitions that prevent a unified response to a threat that knows no borders and involves actors adept at the dark arts of cloaking their financial tracks. Though approaches to law enforcement differ, a shared syntax on terror financing can be detected with growing recognition that the misuse of modern technology needs a new and more cooperative approach to border control.

The discussions at the NMFT meeting gave India an opportunity to not only iterate its concerns about cross-border terrorism sourced from Pakistan but also put forward its learning gained from decades of anti-terror and counter-insurgency operations that have reduced the levels of violence. It was in keeping with the objective of setting up a continuous and institutionalised process of consultations that Union Home Minister Amit Shah proposed a permanent secretariat for the NMFT deliberations. It is understood that the proposal has been well received and the process of installing a secretariat will begin soon. More than an administrative device, the secretariat will function as a think-tank and provide a platform for sharing experiences, practices and study papers on subjects like the complex world of the dark web and emerging technologies, said an informed source. The chair's statement noted the need for consultative mechanisms in the light of the use of "official and unofficial" channels to fund terrorism. The statement also said that "[A]ctions to counter terrorism and its financing should be collective and unified, without exceptions on any ground and recommitted to a zero-tolerance approach to terrorism." Read with the ministerial conference noting that terrorists accessing "safe havens" remain a significant concern, the conference reflected India's view that terrorism should not be viewed through political prisms. Shah dwelled on the concern in his opening and closing addresses when he said, without naming Pakistan, that there are countries that seek to hinder the fight against terrorism by sheltering and protecting terrorists.

Inaugurating the NMFT conference, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed the need to recognise terrorism without distractions. He said there should be no ambiguity in dealing with terrorism and warned against nations that use terrorism as a tool of foreign policy. Stating that even a single life lost to terrorism is one too many, Modi said, "There is no good terrorism and bad terrorism. It is an attack on humanity, freedom and civilisation. Only a uniform, unified and zero-tolerance approach can defeat terrorism. There must be a cost imposed on countries that support terrorism." The prime minister warned against "indirect arguments" to support terrorism or block action against terrorists, a reference to both state support for terrorism and actions to prevent sanctions against terrorists, as has been the case with China blocking India's bid at the UN to sanction the leaders of Lashkar-e-Toiba based in Pakistan. Speaking to the media in Delhi last month, Interpol General Secretary Jürgen Stock said a Red Corner notice cannot be issued if the request is political, religious, military or racial in nature. He was responding to queries about Interpol rejecting RCN requests against persons like controversial Islamic preacher Zakir Naik and Khalistani leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannu. Interpol's interpretation that there is a "political dimension" to activities of individuals like Pannu, despite the long record of Khalistani outfits instigating and organising violence, has led India to repeatedly stress the need for an agreed definition of terrorism.

THE MODI GOVERNMENT FEELS A SENSE OF VINDICATION ABOUT THE DISCUSSIONS THAT REFLECT ITS CONCERNS ON TERROR-FINANCING. THE CONFERENCES HAVE ALSO ALLOWED INDIA TO SPEAK OF ITS SUCCESSES LIKE STRONG ANTI-TERROR LAWS AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF AGENCIES

In his concluding remarks, Shah said, "We have to fight this war against terrorism and terrorist groups in every geographical space, in every virtual space. There have been many instances when, under the guise of other motives, some organisations promote terrorism and radicalisation at the national and international levels... Recently, the government of India banned an organisation that conspired to radicalise youth and push them towards terrorism. I believe that every country should identify and take stringent action against such organisations." The reference to the recent ban on the Popular Front of India (PFI) was not missed. It is precisely the need for a convergence on defining terrorism and aligning laws and surveillance to cut through political and legal subterfuge that has led to the proposal for a permanent secretariat. India hopes that the threat of new-age terrorism will spur countries to consider active sharing of perspectives even if it does not immediately lead to formalised intelligence-sharing or a common definition of terrorism.

The risks that nations must analyse, the conference statement said, include hawala, cash, MVTS (money or value transfer services), banking remittances, virtual assets, DNFBPs (designated non-financial businesses and professions), barter systems, non-profits and the use of unmanned aerial systems to transport drugs, arms, explosives and ammunition. The use of drones has been regularly detected along the border with Pakistan where UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) are used to supply terrorists and criminals with money and weapons. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) came in for praise at all the conferences held in Delhi recently and the forum has seen Pakistan come under pressure for failing to act against terrorism. Yet, its procedures can be cumbersome given the need to apply various parameters in a non-discriminatory manner. The decision to take Pakistan off the grey list (when a country is subjected to increased monitoring and asked to address deficiencies in dealing with money-laundering) is expected to result in more leeway for terror groups. Shah unambiguously noted the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the challenges this posed. "After August 2021, the situation in the South Asian region has changed. The regime change and growing influence of Al Qaeda and ISIS [Islamic State] have emerged as a significant challenge to regional security," he said and reminded attendees how a similar situation had led to 9/11. "Along with Al Qaeda, organisations in South Asia like Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed continue to spread terror," he said. Delegates said the roadmap mentioned by Shah included a monitoring network, harmonising of legal structures, and strengthening of regulatory structures. The home minister's participation on both days of the conference was intended to underscore India's commitment to the NMFT objectives.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah at the 90th General Assembly of Interpol, New Delhi, October 21, 2022

PIB

IT WAS IN KEEPING WITH THE OBJECTIVE OF SETTING UP A CONTINUOUS AND INSTITUTIONALISED PROCESS OF CONSULTATIONS THAT AMIT SHAH PROPOSED A PERMANENT SECRETARIAT FOR NMFT DELIBERATIONS. THE PROCESS OF INSTALLING A SECRETARIAT WILL BEGIN SOON

The Delhi declaration of the UNSC's CTC also focused on technology that can aid transnational terrorists. "The declaration aims to cover the main concerns surrounding the abuse of drones, social media platforms, and crowd funding, and create guidelines that will help to tackle the growing issue," the UN said. There will be draft recommendations on terrorists' exploitation of information and communications technology (ICT), such as payment technologies and fundraising methods and misuse of unmanned aerial systems. Besides, the "declaration also decided on a new set of non-binding guiding principles to assist member states in countering the digital terrorism threat... with a compilation of good practices on the opportunities offered by the same set of technologies to tackle threats." Like the NMFT and much of the Interpol deliberations, the UNSC CTC was also concerned with terrorist finances finding newer avenues that are more difficult to track without concerted international collaboration. Such a convergence requires a shared understanding of methods used by terrorists and a deep knowledge of their organisational structures. The use of satellites gave intelligence agencies powerful tools to interdict communication and monitor suspicious activity. The fields of quantum computing and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are vital to processing massive volumes of data scooped up by national agencies that use advanced algorithms to monitor everything from banking transactions to security camera feeds.

The Modi government feels a sense of vindication about the discussions that reflect to a considerable extent its concerns on terror-financing. The conferences have also allowed India to speak of its successes, with Shah pointing out that strong anti-terror laws and the empowerment of agencies have led to a low incidence of terrorism in India. The relative success of these strategies, particularly in the light of bold political decisions like the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, has led to a greater acceptance of India's position and formulations on combating terrorism and to Delhi hosting influential gatherings. The policy dialogue is in keeping with the government's political stance of being tough on terror and it can consequently look for benefits on this count. However, the persistent and enhanced threats in the neighbourhood, with Pakistan's deep state viewing Afghanistan as a means to achieve strategic depth against India, require ceaseless vigil and partners who share India's urgency in countering terrorism. ■

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A CRYPTO MEL

Does the FTX collapse mark the end of cryptocurrency? Insiders say such shocks are

By ULLEKH NP

INVESTORS DON'T OWN A CRYSTAL BALL BUT they fall back on clues. Nothing could have been as bad a premonition—or close to a crystal ball—for crypto investors as the crash early this month of the high-profile Bahamas-based cryptocurrency exchange FTX and its partner firm Alameda Research, which is headquartered in Hong Kong. While more details of the FTX-Alameda saga are yet to emerge, crypto companies, even in India, are contemplating diversification in order to generate alternate revenue streams amid a drop in transactions.

The well-connected and highly networked duo—Sam Bankman-Fried (SBF), founder of FTX, and Caroline Ellison, former CEO of Alameda Research, which was also founded by SBF—are under sharp attack for being grossly irresponsible with other people's money and for indulging in alleged fraud using customer funds. More damning is the proof surfacing of the potential connivance of institutions and people in positions of power. Both companies have filed for bankruptcy through Chapter 11 of the US Bankruptcy Code which would allow them to reorganise their businesses instead of liquidating them. Alongside business news, social media and even mainstream media outlets are abuzz with titillating stories about the grandees at the core of the team at FTX and Alameda fostering polycule relationships, besides being addicted to hard drugs.

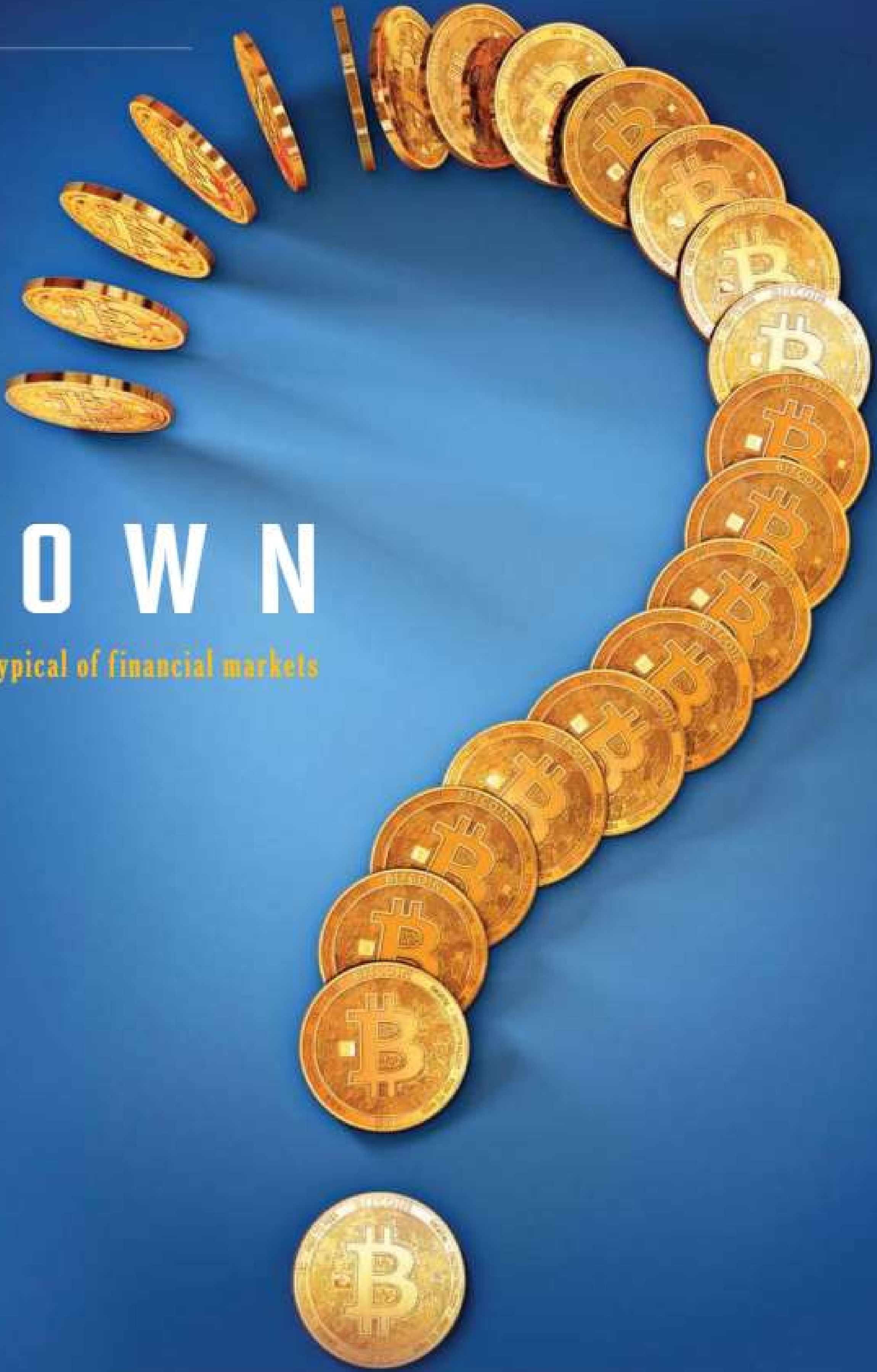
People who have lost their money, including those who withdrew their investments from FTX at the last minute, aren't enthused about these love triangles or quads or such reported polyamorous partnerships among those they—as well as institutions—blindly trusted. Neither are crypto firms that feel the heat in the wake of what has been referred to as a 'crypto contagion', a term, they aver, is being lapped up to discredit the whole system as being opaque and infested with crooks. They are piqued, however, that Bankman-Fried's parents and FTX senior staff bought property worth around $300 million in the Bahamas with what they assume is their money.

A closer look at the FTX fall perhaps gives enough indication to suggest that the fault is not exactly in the alternative form of payment created using blockchain technology but in the way the activities of the now fallen crypto exchange and the like were brushed under the carpet. As early as May this year, Terrence Duffy, CEO of American global markets company CME Group Inc, which runs the world's largest financial derivatives exchange, had offered hair-raising testimonies to the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture that FTX had not set aside sufficient financial resources to back its "proposed direct clearing model for crypto derivatives". Which meant the now-bankrupt crypto exchange had not made proper arrangements to ensure a timely transfer of funds to the seller and tokens to the buyer. He also went on to say at the May 12 hearing that what FTX was doing, unlike the whole concept of cryptocurrencies, was not "innovation", but an "invasion of best practices and prudent risk management." Interestingly, after Bankman-Fried's fall from grace, Duffy told reporters that he wouldn't stop crypto-futures trading just because of "one bad actor".

If such early warnings, like these ones by Duffy and others, were hair-raising, to say the least, eyebrow-raising is the apt expression to qualify the institutional response to them. The pressure, certainly, is on authorities tasked with overseeing the US derivative markets.

TDOWN

temporary and typical of financial markets



200 MILLION
PEOPLE OWN
CRYPTOCURRENCIES
GLOBALLY

25 MILLION
USERS OF
CRYPTO COINS
ARE IN INDIA

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

But then the collateral damage cannot be underestimated. Even so, crypto players across the world, including in India, express confidence in weathering the storm on the back of the learnings from the FTX saga.

For his part, Atul Khekade, co-founder of XinFin (XDC) Network, tells *Open* in an interview that crypto is an evolving industry, and one that will have some speed bumps on its path to broader utilisation. “It is an industry that has brought innovation and fundamental changes to the world of finance. Some of the world’s largest financial institutions and global industries have committed to crypto’s underlying blockchain technology to improve long-held and archaic processes,” he says.

As regards the FTX crash, he points out that as the dust settles, there’s a lot that can be taken away from the FTX situation. “It drives home that transparency, accountability, and security remain the most important elements in community engagement, despite any other variables,” he notes, emphasising that crypto is a space that accommodates a large ecosystem of communities, from traders to artists to developers. He hastens to make the distinction between a downturn and the technology behind it. “The FTX community has suffered a great loss, but the blockchain industry has developed out of restrictive, vulnerable systems and throughout its existence, has proven to be antifragile. Out of the pain of the FTX saga, the industry will likely learn and emerge stronger, better equipped with principles and standards,” he affirms.

Sam Bankman-Fried

Caroline Ellison

PEOPLE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR MONEY, INCLUDING THOSE WHO WITHDREW THEIR INVESTMENTS FROM FTX AT THE LAST MINUTE, AREN’T ENTHUSED ABOUT LOVE TRIANGLES OR QUADS OR SUCH REPORTED POLYAMOROUS PARTNERSHIPS AMONG THOSE THEY—AS WELL AS INSTITUTIONS—BLINDLY TRUSTED

To be sure, India is one of the countries where the tremors of the FTX meltdown have been felt the hardest. That is not surprising since it ranks fourth in blockchain analysis platform Chainalysis’ global crypto adoption index this year of nations with the highest cryptocurrency adoption rate. The index was prepared comparing investments in crypto with the wealth of the average person and the value of money generally within a country.

Nischal Shetty, founder-CEO of Mumbai-based crypto exchange WazirX, argues that bull and bear cycles are part of any financial market, and crypto is no different. “What is important is to gauge user and investor interest. That seems to be on a steady upward trend for crypto historically. This interest peaks during the bull market but even in the bear market, there is a steady uptick,” he posits. He goes on to say that in every bear cycle, there are narratives around the demise of crypto that get pushed. “All these narratives disappear during the bull cycle. We’re seeing the same pattern repeating every few years,” Shetty says.

IN A BUDDING industry like cryptocurrency, entrepreneurs and participants should keep an eye on regulatory efforts that provide a clear framework for industry organisations to work lawfully while providing appropriate investor protections, says Khekade. “That will lead to the sustainable growth of users and healthy development of industry infrastructure. Legitimate organisations will likely embrace such frameworks and seek to maintain compliance and appropriate levels of transparency,” he adds. Shetty, meanwhile, warns that regulators should not take the FTX crash as an opportunity to implement stringent laws that won’t benefit anyone. “Paying high taxes on gains could also keep genuine enthusiasts out of the ecosystem. Instead, they should work towards preventing such incidents in the future. Investor protection laws are the need of the hour,” he cautions. Shetty doesn’t pull any punches when he talks of the FTX collapse. “Incidents like these deter the motivation of the community and make them question the fundamentals of crypto,” he rues.

With a centralised crypto exchange like FTX crumbling, there are those who favour peer-to-peer crypto trade through the blockchain platform that eliminates middlemen, as originally envisaged by the founder of Bitcoin, the first cryptocurrency.

Khekade is not averse to such a migration from centralised exchanges (CEX) to decentralised exchanges (DEX). “Decentralised exchanges have seen major growth in the last few years. With decentralisation as one of the fundamental concepts of blockchain technology, it would be reasonable to see the continued growth of DEX. A decentralised system that facilitates exchange can increase security, liquidity, and efficiency, while decreasing reliance on centralised parties, making it an attractive alternative to CEX,” he tells *Open*.

The problem at hand however refuses to go away, at least for the time being, thanks to problems at FTX. Shetty admits that without a doubt, this crash has led many investors to question the Web 3 movement, which will make use of blockchain-based technologies, and wonder whether it continues to be a safe space with all the adversities around us. “However, like every black swan incident, this will also help us learn some fundamental lessons about what should be avoided going forward,” he adds.

He, however, expects centralised exchanges to be the most

“The FTX community has suffered a great loss, but the blockchain industry has developed out of restrictive, vulnerable systems and throughout its existence, has proven to be antifragile. Out of the pain of the FTX saga, the industry will likely learn and emerge stronger, better equipped with principles and standards”

ATUL KHEKADE COFOUNDER, XINFIN (XDC) NETWORK

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NISCHAL SHETTY FOUNDER-CEO, WAZIRX

popular option for investors for holding crypto. “If investors plan to use crypto as a store of value, the principle should be the same as it is for a traditional store of value assets—diversification. Doing extensive research on tokens before investing in them and not putting large sums of money in one single asset are some of the fundamental principles. You can follow the same value allocation principle as you would do for traditional assets,” Shetty says. He explains that due to the recent downturn, there has been an uptick in chatter among customers on the use of hardware wallets and other self-custody options. “For seasoned investors who know how to handle their private keys, this is definitely a good option. But self-custody is still to reach a stage where the maximum number of users can use it. We need more products with simpler UX [user experience] for self-custody to go mainstream. Until then, centralised exchanges will continue to be the major custodians of digital assets,” he prophesies.

Louder, though, are forecasts of crypto dying a fast death.

Sapna Singh, crypto influencer with a huge social media following in India, dismisses them as a figment of the imagination of people with certain interests. “We know the crypto market is not as big as the stock or the commodities markets. This means a big collapse of a large exchange will shake the entire industry to its roots. But it will definitely recover from this collapse because the Bitcoin fundamentals haven't changed,” she asserts.

Bengaluru-based crypto enthusiast and former MNC banker Sreejith Sreedharan highlights the power of blockchain technology and its pre-eminence. He also states that what we know about FTX's collapse till date is only the tip of the iceberg, yet singling out crypto for attack is a short-sighted move. “Pronouncing its death is far worse a diagnosis, especially when more than 90 per cent of all financial crimes happen on supremely regulated financial turfs,” he adds.

Sreedharan, who continues to invest in crypto and is gung-ho about the widely adopted Pi cryptocurrency, shares the view that the future of crypto is its use case or usability. He also bets big on decentralised exchanges and avenues where money is separated from state power that can confiscate money on a whim.

A senior executive at a global crypto company, who spoke on condition of anonymity, also agreed with Sreedharan that “what is happening in crypto is a result of a lack of use cases.” He regrets that the only thing several people these days do is speculate and make financial gains. He goes on: “So, you see sophisticated financial products. Some of them overextend themselves with leverage, and are caught flatfooted when the values drop.” The crypto space really needs use cases, he reaffirms. “Then we'll be hearing about how it is improving people's lives,” he declares.

But then this is the season of cautionary warnings about crypto, with the markets crashing once again six months after the collapse of the Luna currency operated by Terra Labs in May (*https://openthemagazine.com/feature/decoding-the-crypto-bloodbath/*).

Mumbai-based Ritesh Bhatia of V4web Cybersecurity tells *Open* that lately his firm receives more complaints than in the past about financial crimes involving cryptocurrencies. “Now, I get as many as 3-4 complaints a week compared with once a month earlier. Most of the complaints are about pig-butchering scams with victims having lost all their money. In pig-butchering, a scammer builds trust with their victims before eventually persuading them to deposit more and more of their crypto assets into bogus digital wallets or websites controlled by the scammer.” From a security perspective, he says, investors should not put all eggs in one basket and must have multiple crypto wallets. Pig-butchering, in the world of cryptos, is also called a confidence crime.

Confidence in crypto seems to have dipped amidst all the chaos and reported sleaze scandals involving FTX and Alameda hotshots, but with insiders terming such incidents, rightly, as business-as-usual in markets, it looks unlikely that their obit writers will have the last laugh anytime soon. ■

TO THE MOON AND

WITH THE LAUNCH OF NASA'S *ARTEMIS*, THE RACE FOR
BEGINS EVEN AS INDIA WAITS AND WATCHES WHOM

BEYOND

SPACE COLONISATION TO PARTNER WITH

The first flight of NASA's *Artemis* programme lifts off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, November 16, 2022

AP

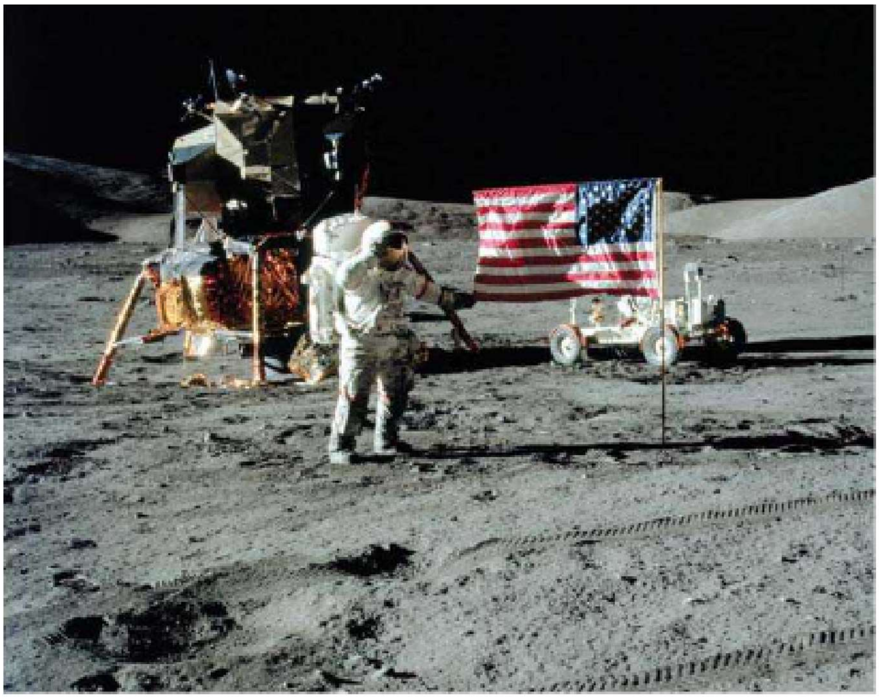
By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

2001: *A SPACE ODYSSEY*, ONE OF THE most popular science fiction books ever written, begins with a mysterious small structure on the moon that couldn't be natural because of its clear geometrical ratios. And then a similar but much bigger one is observed in one of the moons of Jupiter. This, in the imagination of the writer Arthur C Clarke, was an advanced alien civilisation making humans ready for contact. As it turns out, the search for other worlds by humans is also beginning with the moon. It already did last week when a NASA spacecraft, *Orion*, took off on the first flight of what is called the Artemis missions to the moon. Ordinarily, this wouldn't be something to be excited over. Moon is not very far when it comes to space and we have sent probes beyond the solar system. India itself had *Chandrayaan* going to the moon almost 15 years ago. Artemis is different. It is like Christopher Columbus setting off without knowing what he was about to unleash. Except that we have a very clear vision of the future with Artemis.

The present spacecraft has no passengers but by 2025, the third *Artemis* spacecraft plans to land humans on the moon. That itself will be a milestone because the last person to step foot there was half-a-century ago. The US then realised that the resources being taken over in its competition with the Soviet Union, the incentive for the moon landings, was too high. The money just flowed in one direction without coming back.

Technology is now making it possible to see space as not just exploration but commerce and the promise of vast profits on the distant horizon. For an instance of how the world has changed, a decade ago, a non-governmental organisation called Mars One had the plan to get human beings on a one-way journey to Mars and colonise it. They would finance it by making a longlist of potential volunteer space travellers and then have a reality show to decide on the finalists. The proceeds from that show would fund the project. It didn't work out and Mars One went bankrupt, but it still is an indication of how sources of funds never available before were now there to be tapped. There are also private ventures, like Elon Musk's SpaceX, which has an endpoint in Mars colonisation, and on the way, they are becoming a profitable private company by providing other services related to space.

The one with the deepest pocket still remains the US government. Their first manned moon missions were just flaunting superpower status. Now, they are also looking at space as resource material, starting with the moon. As NASA says on its website about the *Artemis* launch: "With Artemis missions, NASA will land the first woman and first person of color on the Moon, using innovative technologies to explore more of the lunar surface than ever before. We will collaborate with our commercial and international partners to establish the first long-term human-robotic presence on and around the Moon. Then, we will use what we learn on and at the Moon to take the next giant leap: sending the first astronauts to Mars."



Eugene Cernan on the moon during the Apollo 17 mission, December 1972

"Demonstrate new technologies, capabilities, and business approaches needed for future exploration including Mars…Establish American leadership and a strategic presence on the Moon while expanding our US global economic impact…Broaden our commercial and international partnerships."

What makes Artemis truly historical is that they plan to stay on the moon. Just like the International Space Station is a permanent outpost of humanity, the moon will be a base and it's not too far away. Speaking to BBC, Howard Hu, the programme manager for *Orion*, prophesied that this could be by 2030. The BBC website said: "Once the safety of Artemis' components and systems has been tested and proven, Mr Hu said the plan was to have humans living on the Moon 'in this decade'." But there was even more. "A large part of the reason for going back to the Moon is to discover whether there is water at the satellite's south pole, he added, because that could be converted to provide fuel for craft going deeper into space—to Mars, for example. 'We're going to be sending people down to the surface and they're going to be living on that surface and doing science,' Mr Hu said." The presence of water on the moon is crucial to this ambition and India itself made an important contribution when *Chandrayaan* confirmed that it indeed did exist. Water makes a permanent settlement viable because it is the single most important necessity for the human body. It can also become a fuel source and be used to make the environment habitable.

The US leads Artemis, but it is not alone; more than 20 countries are partnering with it, signing what is known as the Artemis Accords. India is still not one of them, but it is considering. Last year, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi met US President Joe Biden, in a factsheet released by the White House on the areas in which progress was made, was also this: "The United States welcomes India's consideration of potential cooperation in Artemis and the Artemis Accords, a set of principles to support the safe and transparent exploration of space to the Moon and beyond."

Just as during the Cold War days, Artemis also has competition now. On the other side of the US-led bloc are Russia and China. Last March, they also announced a plan to set up a permanent base in the moon called International Lunar Research Station. Reporting on it, Space.com said: "Indeed, the two projects appear to be targeting the same general patches of lunar real estate—highland regions that offer easy access to lots of sunlight as well as the water ice that's thought to be abundant on the shadowed floors of polar craters." They are wooing India, too. Given India's fractious relationship with China, it looks unlikely. On the other hand, India has a long history of cooperation over space with Russia. A paper by the thinktank, Takshashila, argued that India is better served by hopping on the Artemis bandwagon. Still, it shouldn't close all its options either because where it stands in space also spills over into relationships on earth. It said: "India's strategy hinges on having a seat at the table. It can join either lunar programmes or both while also simultaneously pushing for an updated UN-based treaty. It must, however, prioritise… While the Artemis programme is likely to bring India the greatest benefits in terms of lunar exploration, it can also simultaneously enhance space cooperation with Russia either through the ILRS or bilaterally."

The colonisation of the moon will be the precursor to the colonisation of Mars. But there could be slippages in between. The *Artemis* launch took place after it was postponed twice, and any disaster with a crewed spacecraft could take the clock back by a long time. Meanwhile, the moon is beginning to attract private ventures, too. A Japanese company, ispace, is planning to be the first commercial venture to put a lander on the moon next week and the spacecraft carrying it is that of SpaceX, also a private company. An article in *Nature* said: "The success of the missions by ispace and other firms will be a "huge, important step to developing the lunar ecosystem", says Ryo Ujiie, chief technology officer at ispace. This system is ultimately geared towards harvesting water on the Moon. Some companies hope that lunar water can be used to produce rocket fuel that could eventually make Solar System exploration cheaper."

As space colonisation becomes a reality, questions of laws to be followed around it are reopening. No one can claim ownership in space because the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 commits that sovereignty on earth cannot extend outside it. German broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW), in an article titled 'Who Owns The Moon?', said: "…but what happens if people extract materials from the moon? Can they own and sell them? According to Soucek [Alexander Soucek, head of public international law at the European Space Agency], this is a major point of tension. 'Country X or Y might say they have no interest in claiming the moon as national territory, but they are interested in owning materials extracted from the moon or Mars and selling them back on Earth," Soucek said." It is why India waits for clarity and chooses to not jump with the US or Russia-China in a hurry. Going with either one is not merely an exploration partnership but signing on for whatever their interpretation of laws of space would be as it is colonised. And if history tells us anything, it is that colonisation is rarely peaceful, even if inevitable. ■

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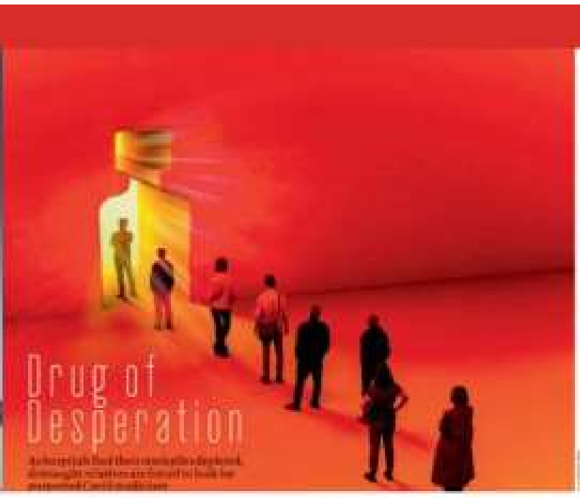
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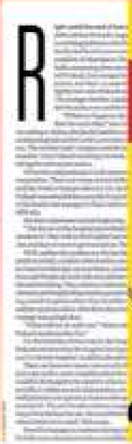

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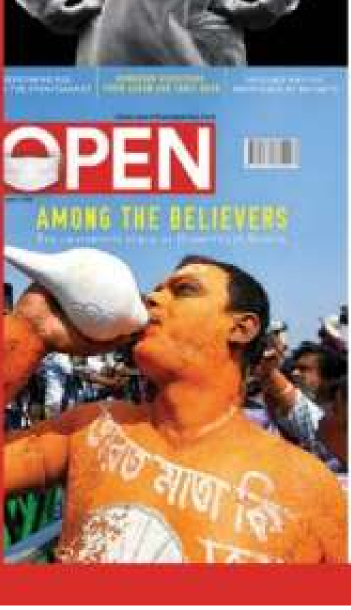
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FALLING FOR FOLIAGE

Rare houseplants have become inst

By **V SHOBA**

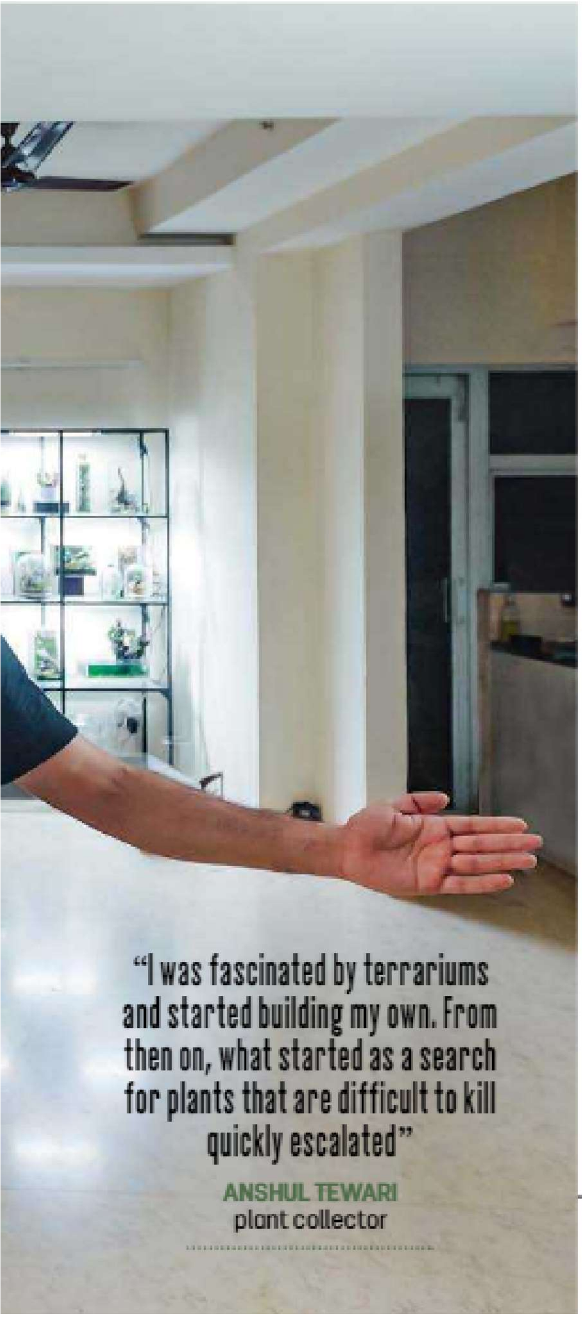
FOR PLANT COLLECTORS, THE QUEEN ANTHURIUM, a stunning plant from Colombia that can produce leaves up to four feet long as it clambers up a tree in the wild, is the equivalent of a Birkin bag. Aditi Rai Dastidar has two of them—the *warocqueanum* 'Esmeralda', a long-leaved, velvety beauty, and the dark narrow anthurium *warocqueanum*. One of the first in India to lay her hands on the Esmeralda earlier this year at a price tag of ₹40,000, she was so excited she made an unboxing video for her Instagram account, @plantaholic_journey. The queens are a happy sight in Dastidar's mini rainforest

Photograph by **RAUL IRANI**

agrammable collectibles for a new generation of urban greenthumbs

of a balcony, but there are others here that won't be outdone: wishlist anthuriums, variegated monsteras—the 'it' plants of our era that have captivated the world of design with their many-eyed gaze—and a large philodendron *billietiae* whose pendant, deeply lobed leaves are like arrowheads pointing at the ground. There is also, among them, a tiny plant tucked inside a plastic bag. Dastidar opens it to reveal an alocasia *azlanii*, a purple jewel of a plant with deep dark veins and gloss that can rival the best enamel. "They are notoriously hard to care for," she says. Even inside her south-facing balcony shielded from sun and wind by a shade net and shower curtains, and with a 5-litre humidifier keeping a fine mist going all day, some of the more fastidious plants require extra care. Those of us who have presided over plant funerals would know. "They are finicky, slow growers that don't always produce the kind of results you expect. Anthuriums can often end in disappointment," says Dastidar. And yet, she eagerly awaits the arrival of her latest buy, an anthurium *regale* stripes, from a seller in Kerala who specialises in anthuriums and has a gardening YouTube channel.

Growing up in Ranchi in houses that always had gardens, Dastidar started keeping common houseplants after moving to Bengaluru in 2005, but it was only three years ago that she began to set her sights on rarer varieties. When she saw an opportunity to acquire for ₹8,000 a *monstera deliciosa albo variegata* from a



"I was fascinated by terrariums and started building my own. From then on, what started as a search for plants that are difficult to kill quickly escalated"

ANSHUL TEWARI
plant collector

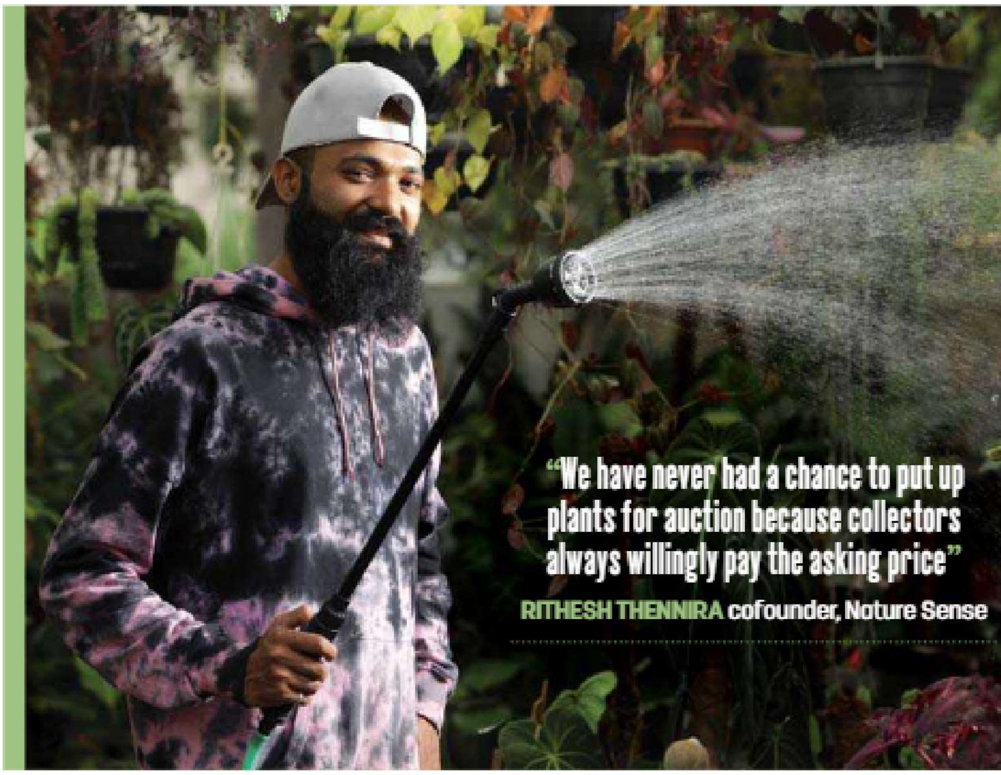
"They are finicky, slow growers that don't always produce the kind of results you expect. Anthuriums can often end in disappointment"

ADITI RAI DASTIDAR plant collector

Photograph by SELVAPRAKASH.L

Pune-based seller who had imported it from Thailand, she took it. The albo is a chimera, or a plant that contains more than one genotype, whose white stripes cutting across large heart-shaped leaves have been immortalised on mood boards and design fora. Dastidar's plant arrived travelled-distressed, however, and almost died on her, and she took cuttings as insurance. After she nursed it back to health, however, it now shoots out a new leaf every two months. "Suddenly, the albo became a rage and sellers wanted to buy back my plant for double the price," Dastidar says. A busy finance professional in her early 40s, Dastidar is only looking to add to her already sizeable collection, spanning two balconies in her apartment in Cox Town—one of them filled with rare hoyas—and her weekend home in Sarjapur on the southern fringes of the city.

Photograph by SELVAPRAKASH.L



"We have never had a chance to put up plants for auction because collectors always willingly pay the asking price"

RITHESH THENNIRA cofounder, Nature Sense

Over the past few years, millennials worldwide have taken to interiorscaping with increasingly exotic houseplants. Serious collectors argue that this generation only acquires plants to keep up with the latest trends in interior design and for instant gratification via hashtags like monsteramonday, greenyourfeed and plantparenthood. To be sure, there are those who hang up their gloves after a spate of plant deaths. But some persist, and can afford to chase more interesting finds. They begin amassing, in their apartments and their makeshift greenhouses, foliage with such glamorous names, and personalities to match, as Ring of Fire, White Knight, Prince of Orange, Purple Sword, Black Cardinal, Dragon Scale, Stingray and Dark Lord. There is even a Holy Ghost—the philodendron named *spiritus sancti* from the Espírito Santo province in southeastern Brazil that sells for about ₹60,000 in India at present. A vast majority of houseplants that are coveted for their exquisite foliage today are aroids—plants of the arum or *Araceae* family. These are tropical understory plants from Asia and America that can thrive in low light conditions so long as you mimic their original forest floor environment by modulating the temperature, humidity and growth medium. Many of them are vigorous climbers, eagerly filling plant shelves and well-lit rooms, and in skilled hands, growing so large they begin to resemble their majestic wild form even if they rarely flower indoors. Aroids give collectors a sense of bringing the jungle in and are more lenient than orchids. One might also argue that the return on investment from aroids, which reward the grower with year-round foliage, is higher, at least for the Instagram generation, than that from orchids, which bloom spectacularly but occasionally. "There was a time when orchid collectors also grew aroids as complementary plants in the greenhouse. King and queen anthuriums were fairly common a couple of decades ago but no one cared for them. It is now that we regret throwing them out and many of us are on an aroid buying spree," says Karthik Hariharan, a 46-year-old orchid collector and techie from Bengaluru who has of late added rare philodendrons including Strawberry Shake and Florida Beauty and the Thai constellation monstera to his collection.

For Indian houseplant aficionados, the Covid-19 lockdown was the perfect time to stock up as they spent more time at home. Two years ago, Bengaluru-based Sujatha V Reddy was preparing for a different kind of quarantine than the one we had come to dread. She was importing rare plants worth ₹5 lakh from Indonesia for Nature Sense, the fledgling nursery in KR Puram, Bengaluru, that she had set up with her husband Rithesh Thennira. This was her first shipment and she knew the process was more complicated than the care-sheets for some of the plants, but she couldn't have known just how much. "Getting the import licence and placing the order were the easy part. At the time of purchase you ask the seller for a phytosanitary certificate. Back home, you pay the customs duty and get a letter of approval from local quarantine officers, then submit your documents and invite them to examine the facility where you propose to quarantine the plants for 45 days. They visit you thrice in that period and check each plant for insects, fungus and pests. It is up to you to host them when they do," says Reddy, who has a quarantine nursery in Sakleshpur. Things worked out for Nature Sense despite the initial hassle. "Many of these plants

Prince Sarma and Rahul Singh

> "During the pandemic, Instagram motivated a lot of people to get into plants. And thanks to falling prices, online platforms have democratised plant collection to an extent"
>
> **PRINCE SARMA** founder, Soiled.in

were new to Indian collectors. We sold out in just one day." Reddy had astutely identified the growing demand in India for plants with strikingly large or variegated foliage and imported some expensive ones like the philodendron majestic and the philodendron *paraiso verde*. "We import every three months—our last shipment came from Thailand in August," says Reddy, who is also a practising advocate. Among the plants she has put up for sale is the so-called 'mini-monstera', *rhaphidophora tetrasperma*, in its variegated form, at ₹25,000 a piece. Last year, a specimen with eight leaves famously sold for NX$27,100 (over ₹13 lakh) in an online auction by New Zealand-based ecommerce platform Trade Me. "We have never had a chance to put up plants for auction because collectors always willingly pay the asking price," Rithesh Thennira says. Just last month, the couple sold the caramel marble philodendron, a sawtooth-edged variety with colours ranging from caramel brown to dark green, for ₹1.1 lakh to a collector in Pune.

THE GOOD NEWS is that prices are falling, and if you wait it out long enough, the rare plant you have been after may be that much more affordable even if a little less rare. Baby Varghese, a rare plants reseller from Kochi, bought a monstera Thai constellation for ₹75,000 a couple of years ago. He has since propagated cuttings but is unable to match the market price of under ₹10,000 per plant. The story of the anthurium *regale*, too, is similar. When it was first illegally smuggled into the country, a plant with three leaves sold for ₹1.5 lakh. Now, with better access to global markets, the price hovers around ₹10,000-₹15,000. "A year ago, I sold an anthurium *luxurians* for ₹92,000. Today, I sold one for ₹10,000. This is not to say that the propagation business isn't profitable. I can acquire a plant for much less—around ₹7,000-₹8,000—and propagate 10-15 plants from it," Varghese says. Business has been dull for the past six months but before that, Varghese was clocking ₹4 lakh-₹6 lakh in monthly average sales. He is propagating even rarer plants now, including philodendrons gigas, Sharoniae, SP Colombia and lynamii—all sourced from Ecuador by a Kerala-based importer.

While the demand for rare plants is miniscule in comparison to the burgeoning market for ordinary houseplants served by the likes of Ugaoo and Nurserylive, it is witnessing unprecedented growth. Prince Sarma and Rahul Singh, 26-year-olds from Tezpur in Assam, set up *Soiled.in* three years ago in response to the palpable interest in rare plants among urban millennials. "We have 25,000 customers now, out of which 7,000-10,000 shop with us regularly. We never thought this would get so big," says Sarma, whose other vocation, graphic design, has taken a backseat. "During the pandemic, Instagram motivated a lot of people to get into plants. And thanks to falling prices, both due to access to international markets and due to indigenous attempts to tissue-culture plants, online platforms have democratised plant collection to an extent." Three years ago, *Soiled.in* sold alocasia dragon scale for ₹4,500 and now the price has fallen to less than a tenth. Alocasia pink dragon, which sold for ₹1,800, costs ₹450.

While tissue culture is an efficient and popular method for mass propagation of plants of commercial value, chimeras are tricky to replicate with this method and will remain expensive, says Arun Tiwari, marketing head of Sarjan Nursery, a wholesale plant seller and tissue culture nursery in Bhuj, Gujarat. "When we choose a plant for tissue culture, there are two factors we consider—the price of the plant in the local and international markets, and the multiplication ratio, or the rate at which we can produce new plants. Monsteras are slow-growing, with an MR of 1:1.5 or less. We have had much more success with other sought-after philodendrons like *verrucosum*. We acquired mother plants in March and we have since realised an MR of 1:40," Tiwari says. Sarjan Nursery has produced over 80 rare varieties via tissue culture so far, and is working on 200 more.

"You can never have them all," says 32-year-old Anshul Tewari, founder and editor-in-chief of Youth Ki Awaaz, a user-generated media platform for youth. He should know. Tewari moved out of his parents' home in 2016 to accommodate his growing collection of terrariums and haworthias—small succulents from southern Africa. "I was fascinated by terrariums and started building my own. From then on, what started as a search for plants that are difficult to kill quickly escalated," Tewari says. His DIY greenhouse is now home to over 2,000 of the world's rarest haworthias and a small but proud collection of his own hybrids. A 4x5-foot terrarium that has been a self-sustaining ecosystem for the past year-and-a-half sits in his living room. And if his two-bedroom apartment wasn't afforested enough, there is an Ikea cabinet with grow lights where he keeps a small but exclusive collection of aroids. "Plant collecting is a weirdly competitive arena. Somewhere down the line, I was getting caught up in the race to get it first, but I have since taken a step back. I only have a few exclusive varieties and I have increasingly turned my focus to educating plant parents who reach out to me about semi-hydroponics." A discerning collector, he argues, is not one who is looking to fill up his house, but one that chooses his plants—or coffee mugs, of which he has over a hundred—with care. ■

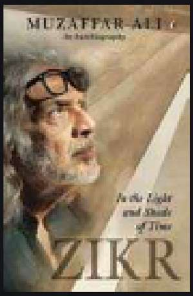
THE AESTHETE

Muzaffar Ali has created beauty on screen, on canvas, and in couture. He talks about his autobiography in a conversation with **Kaveree Bamzai**

YOU'VE HEARD OF his love-hate relationship with the Mumbai film industry in the timeless song from *Gaman* (1978); "*Seene mein jalan, aankhon main toofan sa kyun hai / Is shehar mein har shakhs pareshan sa kyun hai* (Why is there a burning in the chest, a storm in the eyes, why is everyone so troubled in this city?)." You've seen him cutting a swathe in the first few minutes of *Umrao Jaan* (1981) as the tragic zamindar who loses his daughter to a poisonous neighbour. You've admired him as an impresario injecting life into memory through his annual world Sufi music festival Jahan-e-Khusrau. And you've observed the fine attention to detail in the couture he creates through House of Kotwara.

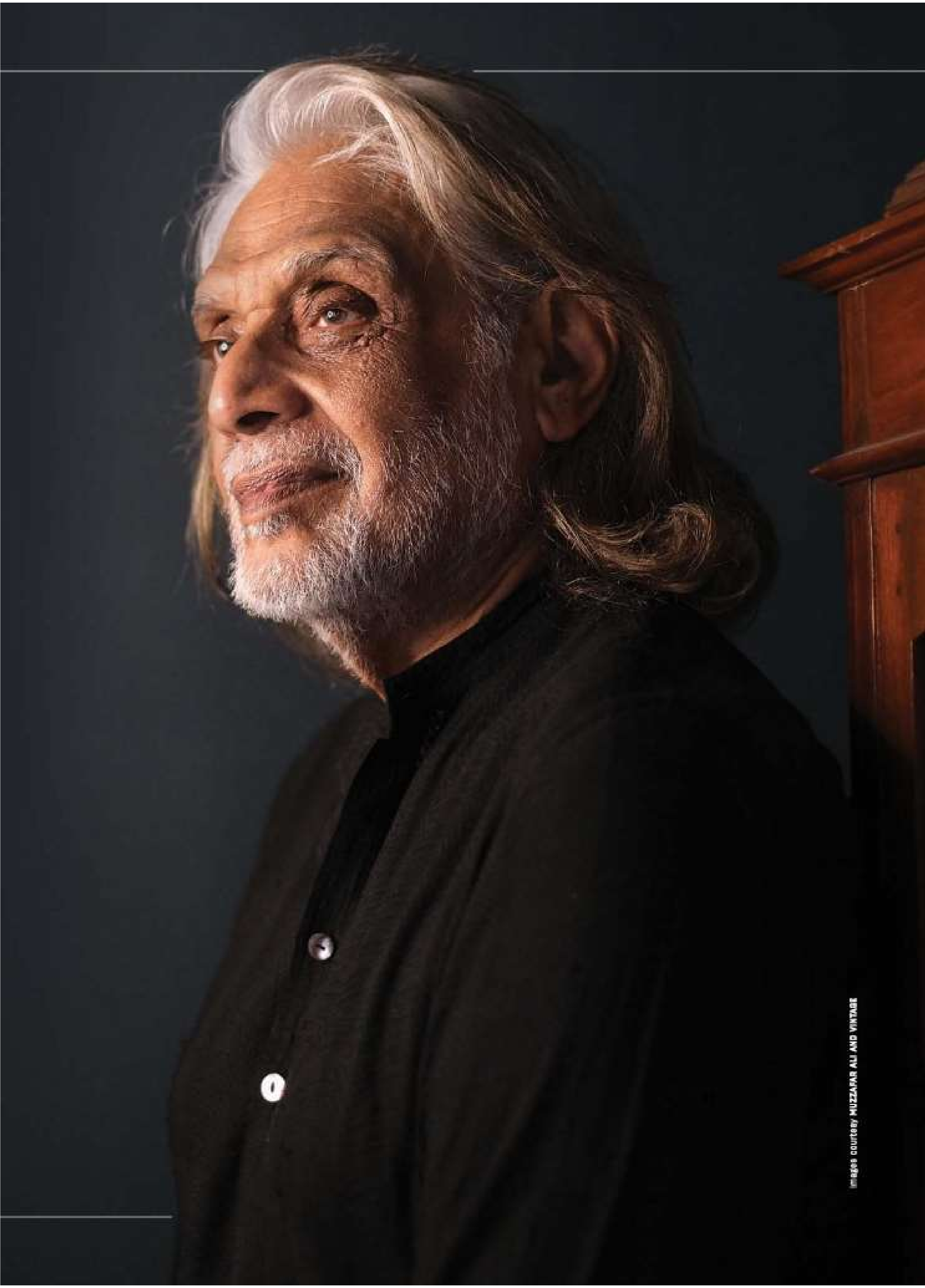
For Muzaffar Ali, 78, art is a way of life, and nostalgia is a kaleidoscope that refreshes and renews him. In an itinerant life that has taken him from Aligarh Muslim University, which prepared him for the political, personal and professional world to a now-lost Lucknow, from boxwallah Kolkata of the sixties to the Mumbai of Air India's heyday to restoring the Kotwara haveli, Ali has accomplished much in many fields.

Now in a new memoir, *Zikr: In the Light and Shade of Time* (Vintage; 264 pages; ₹699), he describes his life as it was, his successes and his failures, his hits and misses, his loves and his losses. It is more than a personal account of a hitherto private life. It is a memoir that chronicles the coarsening of public culture and a civilisational decline. If Ali emerges as a hero, it is entirely incidental, and less a result of what he has written, and more because of the work he has done across the arts, whether it was as a communications specialist for Air India, a filmmaker in the heart of Bollywood, or a couturier who taught gentlemen how to dress again.



Zikr recounts how a new aesthetic renaissance was taking place: "Finally, one could see good Indian taste emerging after two decades of independence. Pupul Jayakar and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay were giving a new meaning to the warp and weft of our culture. Great institutions like the Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation of India (HHEC), Cottage Industries Emporium and India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) were coming up. There was a national space being created in the world of tourism and design in Delhi, and new movements like FabIndia started by John Bissell. There were minds such as Mulk Raj Anand, Khushwant Singh, Joseph Allen

> "Life moves like the wind. I want to be in a place where I believe in what I am doing, and where people believe in me"
>
> **MUZAFFAR ALI** author and filmmaker



Images courtesy MUZZAFAR ALI AND VINTAGE

Stein, Ebrahim Alkazi, Charles and Ratna Fabri, Ramesh and Raj Thapar, as well as Dr Moonis Raza, founder of Jawaharlal Nehru University, who set the tone for an exploration of what the new India would be."

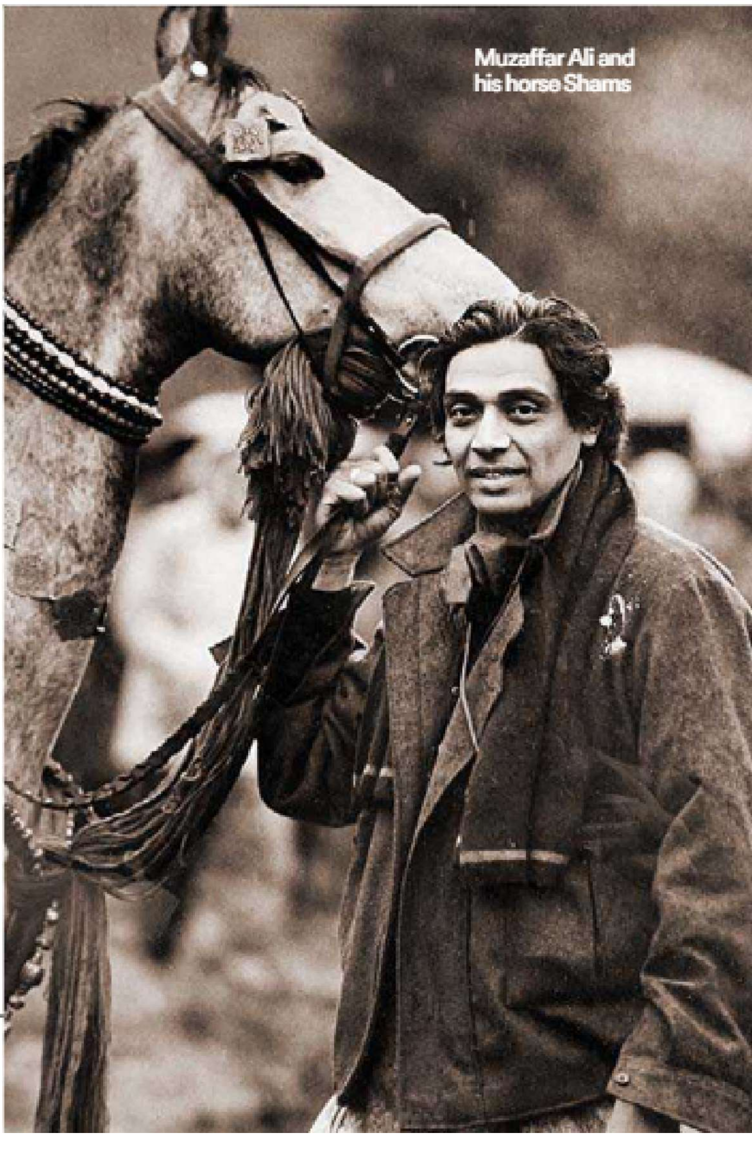
Reflecting on his work, Ali says: "Life moves like the wind. I want to be in a place where I believe in what I am doing, and where people believe in me. Whatever I have done has been people triggering me to do what I have done, at Air India for instance, when people for some inexplicable reason backed me, supported me. Like Bobby Kooka and Nari Dastur of Air India [where he worked first in publicity, then in tourism, and finally in the conventions division], who for some reason believed in me and then had the power to let that belief make a difference. You have to find a person who believes in you."

Bollywood did not have such a person. "I have had a love-hate relationship with the industry. It is not a place for a free mind, for a dreamer. It is a place only for successful people. Others die in penury and loneliness. You become a legend only when you die. Then everyone turns up in white at the cremation or burial ground to offer their respect," he says.

Art, for Ali, is a way of observation. It is like when you see something in long shot and then in a close-up, you enter into a wide frame, dwell on the details and see the light telling its story. "It's all light and shade. *Umrao Jaan* I recorded the story on my long drives in my trusty old Fiat," he says. He could see the light play. And then he was lucky that Rekha, a superstar at the time, surrendered to it. "When people don't surrender, collective art suffers," he says, underlining the malaise which affects much of Bollywood now. As he writes, "Everyone wants to become a Rekha as in *Umrao Jaan* but they have no idea what it takes to achieve that level of surrender." It was a case of living Sufism for him.

HE SEES HIMSELF primarily as a painter. "That's what I do. I'm not a commercial painter but more an internal, spiritual and individual painter. It's a way for people to see what I saw. It has led to all my art. I consider myself ignorant. Everything I do is out of ignorance, or rather open-mindedness. I let people unfold, let them enter my world. I don't tell them what to do. They should feel like welcome visitors," he says. It has been so since he lived in a single room in Kolkata with his cook Tahir while working at the advertising agency Clarion, where the supremely gifted Satyajit Ray was already a legend. "I would walk in and out of his room, I observed him," he says.

If *Umrao Jaan* is his most memorable movie then *Zooni*, his half-finished ode to the poet Habba Khatoon, is the one that got away. When he went to the Kashmir Valley, he felt he could turn his camera wherever he wished. However, the timing was all wrong. The insurgency peaked in 1990 with the forced exile of Kashmiri Pandits, and the Valley was never the same again. "I didn't realise I had walked into a trap. I went there to belong, to live there, to fall in love with the people and the place. I discovered



Muzaffar Ali and his horse Shams

(L-R) Muzaffar Ali, his half-sister Kenize Murad and father Raja S Sajid Husain with Jawaharlal Nehru, New Delhi, 1962

> "My passion is to take people with me, with whom I can share the beauties of nature"
>
> **MUZAFFAR ALI**

there is a bigger trap laid by bigger forces. That's when I found solace in the life and words of the mystics," he says. And he created a new world of no boundaries where there was nothing to sell and nothing to buy, just artists looking for a platform. When there is a gap, he paints or works with those who work with their hands. "I'm still recreating beauty through other people's efforts," he says.

He lives a quiet life in Gwal Pahari near Gurgaon, with 15 dogs and a horse, occasionally travelling to Lucknow, where there are many memories, and to the family home in Kotwara. "My passion is to take people with me, with whom I can share the beauties of nature. I am not very successful there," he says.

Mumbai is now his son's city and his grandson's home. He still loves the Fort area but the Mumbai that he loved, of the Air India building for which he bought works of the modern Indian masters, like Tyeb Mehta, VS Gaitonde and MF Husain, is gone. As are many of the paintings, to offices abroad, to the homes of former managers. Delhi for him is the city of saints, and he doesn't wish to shatter that belief. "A lot of things are better in your dreams," he says, adding, "People have to find their own Lucknow, but also have to feel placeless."

A variety of people and interesting anecdotes flit in and out of his memoir. He mentions that Amitabh Bachchan was known as "Coat on a hanger" during his days in Calcutta; once Mahesh Bhatt announced at a party at Shabana Azmi's home that people like him should not be allowed to make films; a cobbler he met at Opera House, became his shadow; the late prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee nursed his drink, and tackled Ali calmly as he stood against him from Lucknow in an election in 1998; New York fashion editor and designer Mary McFadden championed his work in *Anjuman* (1986) and *Zooni*.

ALI IS ALSO HONEST about the women in his life, his first wife Geeti Sen, art scholar, mother of his first-born Murad and his partner during his Air India days. His second wife Subhashini Ali, fierce Communist, daughter of Colonel Prem Sehgal and Captain Lakshmi Sehgal of the Indian National Army, mother of his second-born Shaad Ali. She was also the Rekha whisperer and friend, without whom his greatest work, *Umrao Jaan*, would not have been possible. And Meera, a gifted architect, mother of his daughter Sama, who shares his dream of Kotwara. "In order to do anything in my life, I have always depended on women," he says.

His father's life runs like a thread through the book. Raja Syed Sajid Husain of Kotwara, a man given to English Savile Row suits and striped silk shirts, who replaced them with coarse, handwoven, hand-spun khadi after 1947, and took a vow to never wear anything else till the day textile mills in India were nationalised. "He could envision a world beyond his time, and his sharp gaze assured him of the power of rational knowledge going public," he writes. His father ran an informal group, the Indian Humanist Union, which met once a month over tea and Good Bakery biscuits, in Qaisar Bagh, Lucknow, discussing ideas that could change the world. "Such ideas never die. They go into hibernation, like many a tree or a bush in winter, biding its time for the spring to come," he writes. His father would sit by the window, typing impassioned letters to the editor on his beloved Corona typewriter, hoping the world would listen. It didn't.

Yet, his son has not lost faith, either in himself, or in the India of his father's dreams. Nostalgia has to rise above being subjective, to become a driving force for social change. He sees art as the only source of beauty in this otherwise "power-hungry system, which is constantly turning black into white through its hold on all channels of communication." He wants people to dream, but he also wants them to fulfil their dreams. "As long as my mind is open and my heart is free," he writes, "new things will find me." That is the Sufi way, the artist's way, the journey of the soul, of the invisible *sawaar* (rider) on the horse of *ishq* (love). ■

THE WAR OF DHARMA

Amish's fourth book in the Ram Chandra series takes contemporary questions to the ancient battlefields

By Gautam Chikermane

THE MOST IMPORTANT tests for an author are whether his explorations are wider, his explanations deeper, his plots more complex, his characters more layered, and whether all are stitched together into a powerful narrative. Amish's 10th book in 12 years, *War of Lanka*, clears all these and delivers a refined literary feast peppered with glimpses of, and perspectives into, Indian culture, ethos, and above all dharma. His retellings take the spirit of the ancient epics, which he rebuilds with ideas and words for the modern mind.

So, Sita becomes a memory of Raavan's past; Vibhishan a traitor who fills you with disgust; Kumbhakarna, a brother as devoted to Raavan as Lakshman, Bharat or Shatrughan—who in a surprising twist of storytelling find space for themselves—to Ram. Raavan remains the most enigmatic and unpredictable character, and the most layered, hovering between black and white, ego and pain, valour and vanity. He is a dark shade of never-seen-before grey. And above them all, at the height of being and actions, following the government of dharma in thought and spirit, and befitting a divine being, an Avatar, stands Ram. All the major characters are covered in a dust of grey. Except for Ram and Sita who represent the rule's exceptions.

Of dharma Ram is born—and he is ready to die for it. By dharma he is trained—and expects others to follow it too. For dharma he acts—even if it means strengthening the enemy. The contrast between Ram's uncompromising service to dharma cuts Raavan's ego like a knife sharpened on the grist of life. At times Ram's adherence to dharma is as frustrating as Yudhishthira's actions around dharma in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. But Ram did not assume a mortal body to establish a spiritual stage of terrestrial evolution, writes Aurobindo. "His business was to destroy Raavan and to establish the Ramarajya." The spiritual boundaries of Ram's dharma were to establish an order that represents the Sattvic ideal.

With ancient epics his canvas, contemporary issues his peg, and the spirit of storytelling in the Indian traditions of philosophy-laced sagas his medium, Amish brings together an epidemic (resonating with the made-in-China Covid-19 pandemic), a cure that has a geopolitical underlining (the greed and pettiness of wealthy nations while distributing vaccines as opposed to India's vaccine diplomacy), and its ethical expressions (real politick versus idealism), pivoting around a debate between fighting to win versus winning with dharma. To Amish, the story is a tool that carries philosophies, in this case dharma. This style is embedded into the storytelling techniques of Bharat. That's how India's two greatest epics, Valmiki's Ramayana and Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, are structured.

LANKA
AMISH

WAR OF LANKA
RAM CHANDRA SERIES BOOK 4
Amish

HarperCollins
475 Pages | ₹499

War of Lanka continues this pace, this treatment, this adventure that began with *The Immortals of Meluha* in 2010, and hints at a future book that returns to Meluha. In other words, a prequel to his Shiva Trilogy. On the canvas of ancient India, through characters we know from our childhood, Amish delivers his unique signature. His narratives embrace a oneness with the ethos of Bharat, they relate to and resonate with modern India, and transcend cultures and geographies to connect with a global audience in 20 languages.

All of this is captured in a story that's always gripping, often imparting a sense of awe, and sometimes allowing for an emotive catharsis. In the middle of the most violent action, in some of the best-conceptualised battle sequences I've read, the deaths of two warriors, one led by dharma (Sursa) and the other by adharma (Kumbhakarna), moisten the eyes. The mace fight between Lakshman and Dhumraksha is a segment whose imagery is as vivid as the action is brutal, and echoes victory-in-defeat heroism—"An honourable death."

I remember the anguish I felt at the death of Bhagadutta and the fall of Bhishma in the Mahabharata. Battles have their own dharma-adharma, almost a rajasic life-death intoxication: Raavan's is different from Ram's, Duryodhana's from Krishna's, Pakistan's and China's from India's.

But the dharmic conflicts in the minds of battling warriors are the same. In Amish's retelling, the deaths of the three greatest heroes of Lanka—Raavan, Kumbhakarna and Indrajit—being recreated and celebrated year after year to this day has a plausible backstory. In other words, Amish's Ram Chandra series takes the spirit of the story from Valmiki's Ramayana but expresses it in words and ideas that speak to a modern country and function within Bharat's

SITA AMISH
RAM AMISH
THE OATH OF THE VAYUPUTRAS AMISH
THE SECRET OF THE NAGAS AMISH
THE IMMORTALS OF MELUHA AMISH
IMMORTAL INDIA AMISH

Amish

AMISH'S RAM CHANDRA SERIES TAKES THE SPIRIT OF VALMIKI'S RAMAYANA BUT EXPRESSES IT IN WORDS THAT SPEAK TO A MODERN COUNTRY AND FUNCTION WITHIN BHARAT'S TRADITIONS

traditions. The interpretative hermeneutics of respect intact, Amish will not be interrogated for writing his version that's so different from Valmiki's. To rephrase the Bhagavad Gita, it is the intent with which an author approaches an action that matters. The words and stories then fall effortlessly, and if sincere, become timeless.

The climax of the Ram Chandra series, *War of Lanka* is easily Amish's best work so far. The first three books laid the foundations of both, the saga and the philosophies; *War of Lanka* is the last note that completes the raga and the symphonies. Conflicting, but not discordant, notes abound. Although the story is about warriors, Kshatriyas, they are driven by rishis Vashishta and Vishwamitra. Amid tension sits laughter, around moments of death tears. Valour and sacrifice underline the characters, weapons and skill become the currency of engagement, and creative imagination the rope binding them all.

Above all, the research is impressive. I can see the long hours Amish must have put into each sequence, from engineering that constructs the Ram Setu and explores the tunnels of Lanka, to bones and muscles working and breaking. A scene of torture shows how deep Amish excavates—a full chapter describes in gory details the extracting of information from a captured warrior that would make even hardened violence experts shudder and wince.

Two conversations stay etched in the heart. First, between Mareech and Indrajit, that in five paragraphs explores the fine line between heroes and leaders: "A hero will fight the enemy against insurmountable odds and embrace death with a flourish. A leader will respond calmly and deny the enemy a key strategic advantage in battle." Business leaders and HR professionals could learn much here.

And second, a 12-page sequence that captures much of contemporary India reflected on the mirror of ancient Bharat, is a conversation between rishis Vashishtha and Vishwamitra about the "overproduction of elites," the wielding of four kinds of power—military, economic, political and ideological—and their complex interrelationships. We see these playing out today in plain sight. For the ongoing societal interrogation of modern India's—even global—elites, Amish provides adequate ammunition with which to explore this theme.

To me personally—as a reader, writer and explorer of ancient India, particularly the Mahabharata—expressions like "net-net," "damnit," and "woah" or precision metrics such as "hours" and "kilometres" jar as they contain too much of the present in them. On this, and across several books, Amish and I have had passionate public debates, not very different from those between Sita and Raavan in Lanka. We hold our own, but when evaluated through success, which is the ability to reach and sell, clearly Amish is several million readers ahead. With this book, he is sure to expand that lead. ■

Neighbourhood Watch

How to prepare for new frontiers of warfare and ensure all-round development of a modern economy

By Rajeev Deshpande

DURING THE DEADLY second wave of the Delta variant of Covid that hit India in 2021, Indian pharma companies developing vaccines against the virus experienced massive cyber-attacks intended to overwhelm their systems. The intruders got through the first line of defence and skimmed large volumes of data. But what they managed to extract was not exclusive and did not reveal secrets related to vaccine development. The source of the cyber-attack was traced to Hong Kong and the hand of Chinese agencies or proxies could not be ruled out. The aim of the breach, it would appear, was to extract information. The possibility of attacks intended to cripple vaccine research or development could not be ruled out, prompting Indian authorities and pharma companies to review their cyber armour.

The relentless cat-and-mouse game in cyberspace (as early as 2009, a massive China-based cyber spying operation infiltrated computers in more than a 100 countries and even stole admission lists in India's army public schools) is now a commonplace. But in the past three years the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war—and in an Indian context—the 28-month military face off with China in Ladakh, have forced a re-evaluation of security in all its dimensions. As can be the case, a real-life crisis can dwarf fiction. The speed with which Covid spread and its paralysing effect on countries defied any sci-fi horror script. The resultant economic dislocation was on an unprecedented scale. The thought that such a virus could be weaponised is terrifying. The Chinese aggression on the line of actual control in the midst of the pandemic showed that even amid new-age threats, the menace of older forms of warfare remains undiminished. And the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought home how autocrats, cut off from genuine feedback, can trigger a global crisis that has raised questions over the durability of nuclear deterrence.

Strategic Challenges: India in 2030, edited by well-known China expert Jayadeva Ranade, provides 10 thought-provoking essays by domain experts on current and emerging threats; spanning from conventional warfare to fast developing areas of AI, quantum computing to the geo-politics of river basins and a whole new range of unconventional threats. Casing these under the umbrella of strategic challenges and looking at near future projections seems relevant, not the least because upheavals in recent times suggest that immediate predictions, beyond a six-month horizon, might be akin to star gazing.

It would be useful to begin with a few shortcomings. The contributions sometimes seem more of a compilation of issues that are not without value, but leave the reader searching for more perspective and insights. The details make the book a comprehensive source to catch up on security discussions, but the matter will seem familiar territory for readers already invested in this field. Yet, the essays bring together varied domains, underlining a connectedness that is increasingly crucial to understanding national security. The articles prod generalists and experts alike to not only consider how wide the compass of security is but to ponder the importance of information-disinformation wars that impact a country's international image and safety of its citizens abroad. The war of narratives is becoming even more significant in a digital age.

In their write ups on China and Pakistan, Ranade and

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

INTRODUCTION BY VIJAY GOKHALE
STRATEGIC CHALLENGES INDIA IN 2030
EDITED BY JAYADEVA RANADE

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES INDIA IN 2030
Edited by Jayadeva Ranade

Harper Collins
336 Pages |₹599

Vikram Sood underline important lessons in dealing with India's primary security threats. In explaining the "inevitability" of enmity with Pakistan, Sood exposes the unsustainable expectations of normalcy with a neighbour wracked by a permanent identity crisis. Almost all Pakistani leaders have seen relations with India as a means to make claims of having extracted some concession or the other. Having tied Kashmir to its Islamist national doctrine, Pakistan's hostility towards India is unremitting. Its rulers will continue to find newer ways to further the objective or slowing or arresting India's growth even as decisions such as abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir make the 'K-fantasy' more unachievable. The recent riots in Leicester where Hindu religious properties were targeted, and the concerted attempts made by British-Pakistani and Islamist Twitter handles to pin the blame for violence on "RSS-Hindutva" elements underlines the dangerous nature of the new warfare. Ranade argues that India needs to shed its defensive mindset in countering China and should pursue ties with its near and far Asian neighbourhood. The Narendra Modi government has, in fact, acted on these lines having firmly shed India's earlier preparedness to insulate its bilateral relationship with China from border tensions. India's decision to make normalcy on the borders a primary condition for normalisation of ties has certainly surprised China. But that does not mean Beijing is giving up on its goal of being the unquestioned Asian hegemon on the way to displacing the US as the world's most powerful nation.

The October 2020 power outage in Mumbai that shut down trains and the stock market and which was likely caused by Chinese cyber-attacks, Lt Gen (retd) Rakesh Sharma points out, reflects a new frontier of warfare. It might be a test for tactics that can accompany regular war fighting. In recent years Russian-inspired attacks have regularly hit Ukrainian power stations and even those in Europe. The range of new technology threats cannot be met by ad hoc upgrades but depends on a concerted and all-round development of a modern economy. India has taken big steps in digital infrastructure, which should be further boosted by the 5G rollout. But the massive data transfers and storage of sensitive information, says Kiran Karnik, highlight new vulnerabilities and the need for better protective measures. It is no surprise the Aadhar authority has a panel of some of the best minds drawn from the IITs and other institutes to regularly review its safety structures. Even conventional theatres need to be examined with a fresh pair of eyes. Vice Admiral (retd) Shekhar Sinha firmly backs the need for aircraft carriers as a visible and effective symbol of power projection in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which is increasingly a centre of Chinese attention. China's success in gaining control and access to ports in Pakistan, Gulf and eastern Africa can facilitate increased intrusions into India's zone of interest and influence. Countries trapped by Chinese debt have neither will nor ability to turn down China's coercive requests. Considering force projection in the Indian Ocean as a factor not unrelated to tensions in the Himalayas is an engaging and relevant thought.

In discussing the salience of the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra basin, Uttam Sinha, who has written on the complex history of sharing of Indus waters between India and Pakistan, argues that riparian relations must be a central part of bilateral relations with China. Just like border issues, India needs to press China on the need to agree on a formal pact on sharing Tsangpo-Brahmaputra waters and preserve the ecological stability of the river during its course through Tibet. He points out that the volume of water increases dramatically during the river's passage through India and stronger cooperation with Bangladesh, Nepal and groupings like BIMSTEC can increase New Delhi's leverage. As recognised decades ago by Mao Zedong, Tibet's water resources are crucial to China's political stability. All told, the essays are thought provoking and serve to remind of a gap in India's strategic culture that needs urgent attention. ■

THE 10 ESSAYS IN THE BOOK, BY EXPERTS, BRING TOGETHER VARIED DOMAINS, UNDERLINING A CONNECTEDNESS THAT IS INCREASINGLY CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL SECURITY

Memory as Metaphor

Magic realism meets history in this retelling of Bangladesh's origins

By Madhulika Liddle

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

FICTION TENDS TO mostly discuss the partition of India in terms of its effects on the people of northern India; what happened to those on the eastern borders of the country is often ignored. But the strife, the anguish, and the displacement that happened in Bengal were just as appalling, and continued for many years after 1947. What is more, the partition of Bengal in 1947 had been preceded by an earlier, also disturbing partition in 1905; and, less than 30 years down the line, it was followed by the war that led to the formation of Bangladesh.

1947 and 1971 are, in a way, the basis of Iffat Nawaz's novel *Shurjo's Clan*. The ghosts (quite literally) of these two cataclysmic events form some of the major characters of the story. The protagonist Shurjomukhi 'Shurjo' grows up in a household dominated by the past: her grandparents came east during the Partition of 1947; her parents were born during the upheavals of a newborn East Pakistan. Shurjo's father Babu lost his two brothers Shoku and Bhiku to the war; they were martyred in the tea estates of Sylhet, where Shoku was working when war broke out. Babu was the one who, travelling up to Sylhet, found their mutilated bodies and buried them. And who, every evening in his home now in Dhaka, hosts Shoku and Bhiku at dinner. For Shoku and Bhiku are part of the Unknown World, a realm bordering the Known World, and separated from it by daylight. Night falls, and Babu's wife Bela, along with her mother-in-law Paru, prepares a big dinner to which come their guests: Shoku, Bhiku, and Bela's long-dead mother Shantori, who had jumped into a well as a new mother. The family, both from the Known World and the Unknown, comes together every night to eat, and—more importantly—to talk. Her uncles' and father's reminiscences about the war, her family's stories of the years gone by, shape Shurjo's early years, filling her with memories that aren't hers, moulding her mind, her beliefs, her sense of what it means to be Bangladeshi.

When Shurjo's parents decide to move to the US in an attempt to shake Shurjo free of the ghosts that surround her—benevolent though those spirits be, much-loved and dear—life changes for all of them. For Babu, Bela and Shurjo far away in the US, and for those they leave behind, on both sides of the divide.

Shurjo's Clan is an unusual example of magical realism: a story of the supernatural, but one crafted with so much heart that it becomes a metaphor. A metaphor of the memories Bangladeshis (and other nationalities, other ethnicities with a history of bloodshed and migration) might carry with them. Partition, the war of 1971, and the migration of Bangladeshis to the west form important pivotal points here, each contributing to the tension, the sense of both rootedness and of being uprooted, of fitting in and of standing out.

Interestingly enough, Nawaz does not go deep into the details of either Partition or 1971; both are mentioned briefly (Partition even more fleetingly than 1971), and in the form of quick snapshots of what Shurjo's family experienced during these turbulent times. Only the far-reaching effects of these form the main focus of the novel, as Shurjo, growing from a young just-teen to a woman in her thirties, deals with her family's past and her own experiences growing up as part of the diaspora.

Nawaz's prose is lyrical, deeply insightful (especially when it comes to the nuances of being an immigrant), and moving. Her characters are believable, their stresses real, their sorrows and joys balanced. Shurjo's story is an unusual coming-of-age tale: for its protagonist, of course, but also, perhaps, in a symbolic way, of Bangladeshis themselves. A coming to terms with the past, a settling into a modern skin. ■

shurjo's
clan
IFFAT NAWAZ

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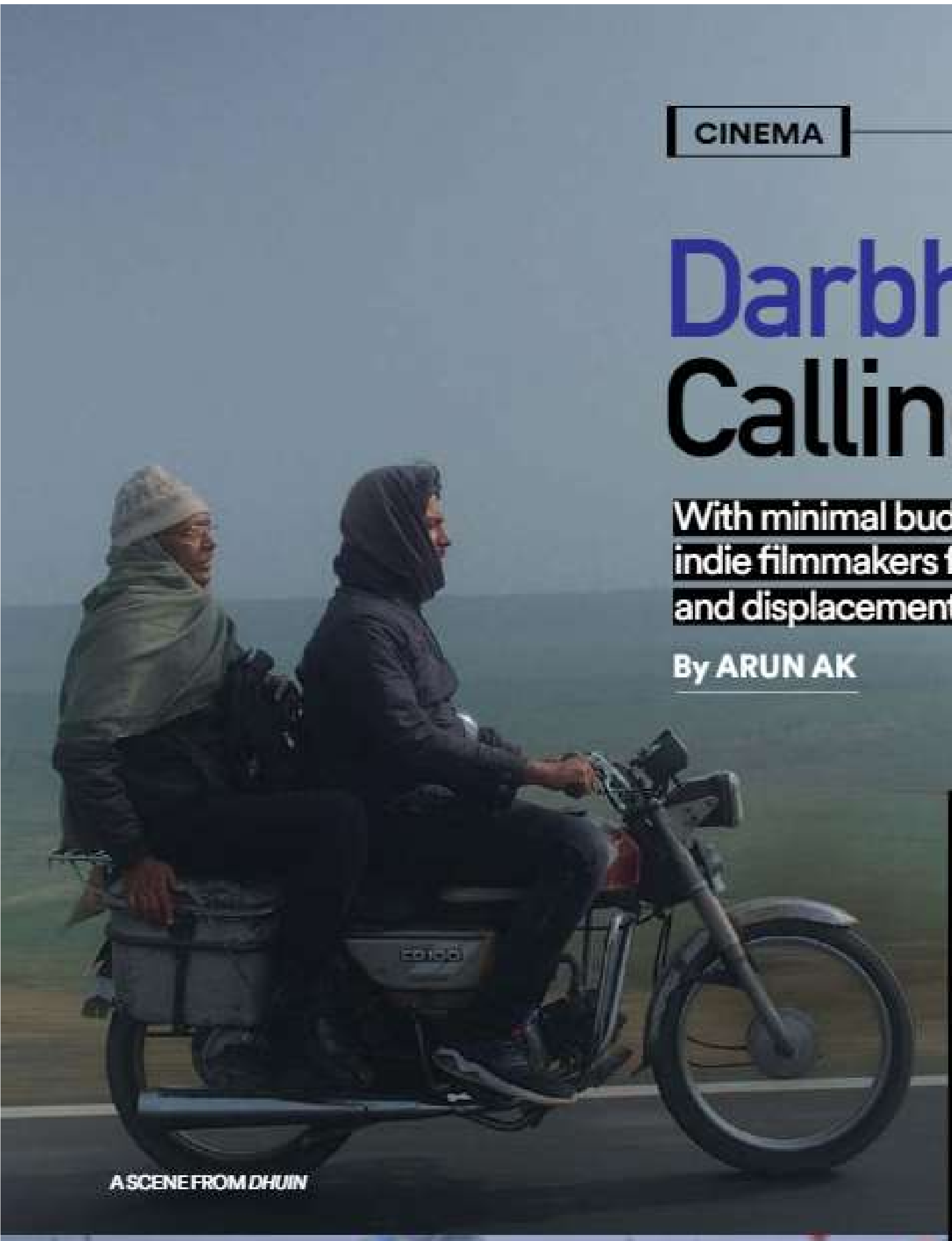
CINEMA

Darbhanga Calling

With minimal budgets and skeletal crews, indie filmmakers from Bihar tell of dreams and displacement, love and revolt

By ARUN AK



A SCENE FROM *DHUIN*

A SCENE FROM *POKHAR KE DUNU PAAR*

A SCENE FROM *DHARTI LATAR RE HORO*

In one of the defining scenes of Achal Mishra's second feature film, *Dhuin (Mist)*, the protagonist (playing a theatre actor in Darbhanga) meets his filmmaker friend, Shishir Jha, who is in the company of two other filmmakers, Sumit Mishra and Dipesh Chandra. Unlike the primary character, the three filmmakers aren't fictional, but are filmmakers in real life as well. Jha has returned to Darbhanga after completing a filmmaking workshop with Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami in Cuba, and the three filmmakers wax eloquent about the maestro's cinema. When Jha, who is based out of Mumbai, asks Chandra if he plans to shift base to Mumbai, Chandra responds, "No. For me, Darbhanga is my small Iran." And Jha replies, "You're Darbhanga's Kiarostami!"

Darbhanga is known as the heart of Mithila and is a seat of music and literature, art and culture, but it has rarely been associated with films. However, in recent years, the town has emerged as a fount for newly emerging indie cinema in Bihar. The recently concluded Dharamshala International Film Festival hosted Mishra's *Dhuin*, Jha's *Dharti Latar Re Horo (Tortoise Under the Earth)* and the work of their fellow Mumbai-based friend also with roots in Darbhanga—Parth Saurabh's *Pokhar Ke Dunu Paar (On Either Sides of the Pond)*, all of which are from this year. At the venue, film critic Namrata Joshi engaged in a conversation with the three directors to discuss the blossoming indie wave in their hometown. She drew comparisons with the CineMadurai movement of the 2000s in Tamil cinema, wherein stories from non-urban settings permeated the mainstream. However, the nascent Darbhanga movement is still far from the periphery of commercial cinema, and the three filmmakers seem content for now within the indie realm.

This new-found spotlight on cinema from Mithila owes much to the critical success of Mishra's debut feature, *Gamak Ghar (The Village House*, 2019), which won the inaugural Manish Acharya Award for New Voices in Indian Cinema at the MAMI Mumbai Film Festival 2019. The film dropped on MUBI India in 2020 and has gone on to become one of the most popular films on the niche streaming platform. This May, *Gamak Ghar* was internationally distributed on a few streaming platforms, leading to a review in *The New York Times*, which noted, "The film's still, square images feel so much like paintings that any stray movement—the smoke rising in spirals from a mosquito coil, or a palm tree swaying in a breeze—can seem like magic, a picture come to life." The spotlight on *Gamak Ghar* brightened recently when it, along with *Dhuin*, was screened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, as part of a series on Indian independent cinema.

The popularity of Mishra's work in the indie circuit has helped draw attention to Parth Saurabh's and Shishir Jha's debut feature films, who have both been collaborating with Mishra since *Gamak Ghar*. While Saurabh was a production manager on the film and an additional screenwriter on *Dhuin*, Jha was cast in *Dhuin* for a small yet significant role (mentioned above). Mishra is also one of the producers of *Pokhar Ke Dunu Paar*, which earned a special mention at the San Sebastian International Film Festival 2022 and is being presented by Anurag Kashyap. Jha's *Dharti Latar Re Horo* won the Honourable Mention under the Vanguard section at this year's Vancouver International Film Festival. The trio has built a strong camaraderie and frequently exchange ideas. The similarities in their works can be noticed in their approach to staging time. Through static shots and long takes, they accentuate the spatiotemporal experience. Saurabh says, "Minimalism has become our common visual language, and much of it can be ascribed to having to work around limited resources." Going ahead, he hopes to achieve more fluidity in composing shots, with potentially more resources at his disposal.

Gamak Ghar chronicles two decades of Mishra's ancestral home in Madhopur, near Darbhanga, as it ages and decays, paralleling the deteriorating relationships within three generations of family members. The film explores losing connection with one's roots and the longing to reforge it. Mishra not only had to make do with a minimal crew, but employing newbie actors also came with its own challenges. He would have liked his characters to engage more with the physical space, but at the same time, he also asserts that "the naturalness in the conversations could only have been brought about by local people and non-actors." The only trained actor was the film's protagonist, played by Abhinav Jha, who had to unlearn his craft and improvise. However, Jha stuck to his process of staying in character on set and off-camera to get the mood right. He also followed this approach in *Dhuin* and *Pokhar Ke Dunu Paar*, playing the central role in both films.

While *Gamak Ghar* spans two decades, *Dhuin* chronicles two days in the life of its protagonist, who dreams of making it big in Mumbai's film industry. Mishra says, "With the success of *Gamak Ghar*, I had built too much pressure on myself for my next film and was swamped with several ideas." Pankaj Tripathi, who was deeply moved by *Gamak Ghar*, expressed an interest in working with Mishra. "I then started conceiving a film keeping him in mind. But this jumping from one idea to another felt inorganic."

> "MINIMALISM HAS BECOME OUR COMMON VISUAL LANGUAGE, AND MUCH OF IT CAN BE ASCRIBED TO HAVING TO WORK AROUND LIMITED RESOURCES"
>
> **Parth Saurabh** filmmaker

Mishra eventually went against the tide and, inspired by a personal incident of Prashant Rana, one of his actors in *Gamak Ghar*, decided to build *Dhuin* as an even smaller film with minimal resources and a skeletal crew. To forge intimacy with the characters, cinematographer Anand Bansal framed them in a 4:3 aspect ratio. Bansal and Mishra had previously used the same for the first segment of *Gamak Ghar*, in which they sought to evoke nostalgia and warmth.

Even Saurabh opted for the postcard framing in *Pokhar Ke Dunu Paar*, which follows a couple who had eloped returning to their hometown of Darbhanga due to financial hardships caused by the pandemic. Tension begins to simmer in their relationship as the cavalier attitude of the male irks his partner. The film views life in a small town through the lens of gender. Saurabh astutely portrays the duality in the male protagonist's personality, who likes to bully and dominate his male friends but becomes submissive and vulnerable with his girlfriend. He says, "During the course of filming, I realised the importance of improvisation and not being rigid with the script." Although he has included scenes of the monsoon in the film, he wishes to intensify the use of nature in his future projects. He is inspired by the work of Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas, in whose films nature becomes an integral part of the narrative. "To achieve that, I would have to devote at least six months to the shoot," says Saurabh.

Jha shares the same belief about investing time in cinema, which is why he devoted a year to the shooting of *Dharti Latar Re Horo*. His film narrates the story of a Santhali couple coping with the loss of their daughter in a uranium mining area around 150 km from Darbhanga. Jha thoughtfully excerpts the personal tragedy to contextualise the wider environmental disaster enveloping the Santhal tribe, who are at risk from their proximity to the mines and the compulsion to migrate. The docu-fiction narrative captures the vivid colours of their festivals and, through folk songs, highlights how tribal groups are deeply connected to the forest, their indigenous customs, and their sense of community. However, with changing seasons, ecological degradation comes to the fore as their water becomes toxic. *Dharti Latar Re Horo* documents a rapidly disappearing world, subsumed by unchecked development and displacement. Jha had only one other person assisting him on the crew, Binod Hansda, belonging to the Santhal tribe, who worked as an assistant director, sound recordist, and translator of the Santali language.

As an artist, Jha was always attracted to the visual arts and cinema. Therefore, he enrolled at the National Institute of Design (NID) for a bachelor's programme in Film and Video Communication. Exposure to world cinema led him to discover the work of Abbas Kiarostami, which deeply moved him. He says, "Kiarostami's films are very individualistic and minimal yet so universal. It dawned on me that even such intimate stories could be shared through cinema." In 2016, Jha got the chance to be a part of Kiarostami's filmmaking workshop in Cuba, which was a dream come true. He is currently working on a short film based in Mumbai, *Song of the Sea*, where a tragic love story is set against the backdrop of environmental damage caused by mindless infrastructure development. Jha asserts, "I'm not against urbanisation and globalisation. However, development should not be at the cost of human lives and ecology. We must find ways to progress and co-exist with the natural habitat."

"I REFLECT ON MY CHILDHOOD SPENT IN MY HOMETOWN AS A GLOWING MEMORY OF CAREFREE ABANDON. ONE ALWAYS FEELS LIKE GOING BACK IN TIME"

Achal Mishra filmmaker

Saurabh's journey into cinema is also an interesting one. Like many youngsters from middle-class households, he opted for engineering and got into IIT-Kanpur. However, his zeal for cinema altered his career path, and he joined Whistling Woods International for a diploma course in filmmaking. Saurabh wishes to explore the various manifestations of masculinity deep-rooted in popular culture and plans to create a trilogy around masculinity, with *Pokhar Ke Dunu Paar* being the first instalment.

Mishra has been the node in the triumvirate and has grown to become a prominent face of the new-gen indie wave in India. He grew up in Darbhanga till the age of 10, spent most of his adolescence moving through boarding schools, and later went on to study Film Studies at King's College London but dropped out in the first year. He chose to spend more of his time at the British Film Institute, watching films almost every day. "That is where I really encountered the filmmakers I love now. It also made me unlearn a lot of things. I was mostly watching Asian cinema: the Japanese masters — Yasujiro Ozu and Hirokazu Kore-eda and Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-Hsien. And then I came back and decided to make films," he says. His next film will also be set in Darbhanga, and he is also making a documentary on acclaimed Hindi writer Vinod Kumar Shukla.

The three filmmakers-cum-friends plan to make an anthology set in Darbhanga in the future. But, until then, they have their own paths to tread and will follow their singular methods of self-expression. They will continue to use each other as sounding boards, and their symbiotic relationship has certainly elevated their work. Mishra says, "The final shot of *Gamak Ghar*, where the screen fades to black, was Shishir's idea." But, in Darbhanga, the cinematic darkness has been perforated by the luminous work of Achal Mishra, Parth Saurabh and Shishir Jha. ■

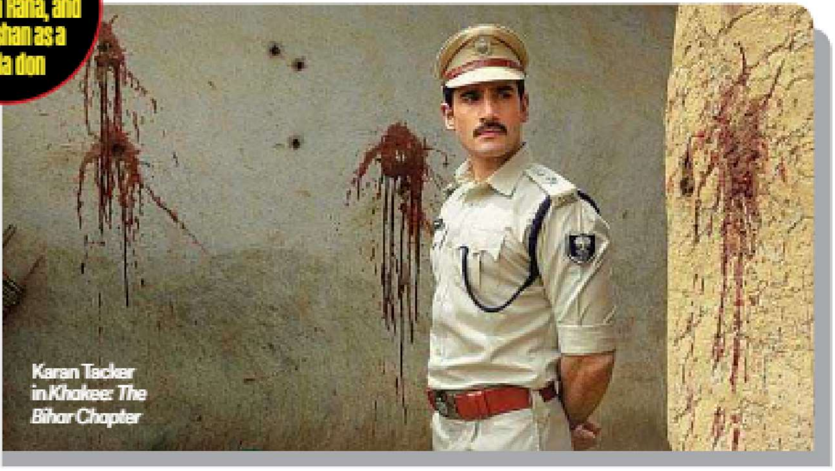
Bihar Badlandia

Khakee: The Bihar Chapter

Cast: Karan Tacker, Avinash Tiwary
Writer: Neeraj Pandey
Language: Hindi
Netflix

Bihar has become the backdrop for much of the political drama that happens in Bollywood streaming. Caste-driven politicians, policemen with spines in short supply, and a general public that is usually caught in a pincer grip between the state and its instruments. Neeraj Pandey's *Khakee* has all this and more, with incidents that highlight the unique state of Bihar. Early on, an old timer tells young Amit Lodha (Karan Tacker), an Indian Police Service probationer, that he can win 50 per cent of the battle for Bihar by saying *hum* not *main*. "*Hum main ek apnapan hai, jo main me nahin hai* (*Hum* has a sense of belonging which *main* doesn't)," he tells Lodha, who is based on a real life police officer. Lodha's career in the force runs parallel to that of Chandan Mahto (Avinash Tiwary), a lower caste, uneducated truck driver who rises to infamy as a series of unintended consequences enable him to become a powerful don. But what about how the oppressor was once oppressed? The caste slurs, the beatings, the insults directed at his masculinity, what makes a man tip over into criminality? *Khakee* examines this and a lot more about what drives men to use violence to settle all disputes, big and small. And also what it would take to put a stop to it. "*Jab aag ko jalne wka darr ho, to bastiyan veeran hone se bach jati hain* (When fire is frightened of getting singed, you can prevent large scale destruction)," says the voiceover. *Khakee* is a worthy addition to the sub genre best known as 'Bihar badlandia'.

Why watch it:
Great lines, a brilliant Ashutosh Rana, and Ravi Kishan as a mafia don



Karan Tacker in *Khakee: The Bihar Chapter*

Godfather Lite

Dharavi Bank

Cast: Suniel Shetty, Vivek Oberoi
Director: Samit Kakkad
Language: Hindi
MX Player

It's the season of mafia dons. This time, the setting is Dharavi, Mumbai's infamous slum with its narrow streets and big hearts, where blood flows into water, where cultures coexist, and where *dhandha* is *ganda* (business is dirty). Suniel Shetty stars as the elusive Thalaivan, a Nayakan sort of don who provides succour for the weak and *suparis* for the strong. Vivek Oberoi is a police officer fond of quoting Shivaji's guerilla warfare tactics. And Sonali Kulkarni, a criminally underused actor, plays the ruthless chief minister who has ordered a hit on Thalaivan, part legend and all real, in order to win the next elections. She may not have the best lines—but she is made to repeat them in English and Marathi so we see how serious she is. The music is loud enough to keep the viewer distracted and everyone has his own signature tune.

Why watch it:
The guilty pleasure in seeing a well-made gangster series

In Case You Missed It

Ticket to Paradise

Cast: George Clooney, Julia Roberts
Director: Ol Parker
Language: English
Amazon Prime Video

There's such a dearth of old-fashioned movie stars at home and abroad that the world's happy to take even mildly amusing movies starring them. So welcome George Clooney and Julia Roberts, two of the world's most charismatic stars, and thank them for lighting up the screen, even if it is with fake grouchiness and fake smiles, as they wile and guile their way through their daughter's wedding. They think she's throwing her life away, and will regret it all her life, like her mother (Roberts) did. Of course, it's just an excuse to listen to the rat-a-rat dialogue between the two stars, lots of eye-rolling, and drunk dancing. Clooney and Roberts have the power to be Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn but this isn't quite *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), but for our star-starved appetites, it will do.

Why watch it:
Five words: George Clooney And Julia Roberts

George Clooney and Julia Roberts in *Ticket to Paradise*

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

KANIKA DHILLON
RAKEYSH OMPRAKASH MEHRA
ANJALI MENON

➲ Welcome to the Hyperlocal

Hyperlocal is the new global. Talk to any sensible filmmaker in the Indian film industry and they will tell you that, whether it is writer Kanika Dhillon who wrote the delicious *Haseen Dillruba* (2021) most recently inspired by her train travels and the Hindi pulp novels with lurid covers she saw on station bookshops; or Anjali Menon, who grew up in the Middle East but was nurtured on the sights, smells and arts of her home country and then trained at the London Film School. Dhillon's character Dinesh Pandit was a literary ode to Surender Mohan Pathak and his twisted mysteries. "The greatest validation for me was when viewers would ask me where they could read Dinesh Pandit novels. Imagine a character you create is considered real. It was so heady," says Dhillon, who grew up in Amritsar and made her way to the Mumbai film industry via Delhi's St Stephen's College and the London School of Economics. Dhillon is now working on *Haseen Dillruba 2* which starts shooting soon, and *Dunki*, where she has collaborated with master storytellers Rajkumar Hirani and Abhijat Joshi. "They finesse every beat, every nuance, working on the script till they faint," she says of the two who have collaborated on writing movies such as *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.* (2003) and *3 Idiots* (2009). Dhillon says she found her voice in *Manmarziyaan* (2018), directed by Anurag Kashyap, which gave her the confidence to be distinctive and edgy, even when the industry wants to reach out to the largest audience possible. "My movies may not make ₹100 crore at the box office but these are the stories I am excited to tell," she says. "Different is the new norm. You can't be average anymore," she adds. Menon, who wrote *Ustad Hotel* (2012), and wrote and directed *Bangalore Days* (2014) and *Koode* (2018), has just worked on *Wonder Women* about a retreat that helps pregnant women unwind. Menon is very conscious of her characters being true to their environment, whether it be Ooty in *Koode* or Kerala in *Ustad Hotel*. It's not gender that drives her as much as character. "We see too many two-dimensional characters and give them far too much power and visibility and it does far too much damage," she says. "We really need to think far more seriously about what we're putting out, because I work with streetchildren and sometimes they'd rather forego a meal and watch a movie, because that memory will stay with them forever. The generic will slowly disappear because we are living in such a rich world," she says. Indeed, the success of regional language streaming platforms such as Hoichoi in Bengali and Aha in Telugu shows the hunger for content close to the viewer's experience. Or even the new kid on the block, Stage, which specialised in dialects like Haryanvi and Rajasthani. Each of them has its own local tales to tell, whether it is family dramas on Hoichoi or reality shows on Aha.

➲ Epic Show

The Mahabharata has usually defied capture on the big screen but two men have decided to bring it to audiences. Anand Neelakantan has written the screenplay for this new film *Karna*, and Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra is to direct it. Neelakantan is a storyteller who knows his subaltern culture well and Mehra has had the experience of going back and forth in time in *Rang de Basanti* (2006) and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013). A big-budget movie laden with special effects, it is an ambitious film that will test the Mumbai film industry's ability to stage the spectacular. After Mani Ratnam's massive success with *Ponniyin Selvan I*, based on Kalki Krishnamurthy's 1955 serialised novel, there are other regional epics waiting to be filmed, prime among them being CV Raman Pillai's Travancore Trilogy, the novels *Marthandavarma* (1891), *Dharmaraja* (1913) and *Ramaraja Bahadur* (1918-19). The possibilities in other languages are endless.

➲ Scene and Heard

The French love Satyajit Ray but the new generation has discovered Indian cinema through a new favourite, *The Lunchbox*. The 2013 movie with Irrfan Khan and Nimrat Kaur has been the second highest grossing foreign film in France over the last 10 years, selling 500,000 tickets. I asked Juleitte Grandmont, the audio visual attaché at the Embassy of France, what made it so popular and she had a simple explanation: "It's about food and love, two things the French are obsessed with." ■

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